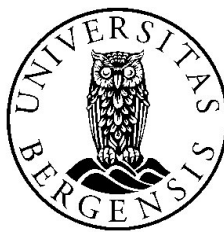


# Are Candidate Evaluations Less Susceptible to Partisan Bias than Party Evaluations?

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# Abstract

According to the personalization hypothesis, voters' attention is shifting away from collective entities like political parties to individual candidates. As attitudes towards candidates are growing more consequential in electoral dynamics, considerable attention has been devoted to the question of what differentiates these from attitudes directed at parties. This literature has focused on the component of attitudes known as *impressions*, defined broadly as the content of attitudes. Far less attention has been devoted to exploring what differentiates party and candidate *evaluations* from each other. In addressing this gap in the literature, this thesis examines the claim that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

Two methods are used to test this claim; a survey experiment conducted on a representative sample of Norwegian citizens, and an observational study using panel data collected during the run-up to the 2017 German federal election. The results support the hypothesis that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

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## Introduction

[P]ercept and reality are not the same, and to gain an understanding of the way change in the external world of politics alters the popular image of political objects, we will ultimately have to consider not only the "real" properties of these objects but certain processes of individual psychology as well.

- The American voter p. 43

Recent research and a great deal of impressionistic evidence suggests that representative democracies are undergoing a process of personalization whereby individual politicians are displacing political parties at the center of the political stage. A key claim associated with this trend is that voting behavior is increasingly influenced by voters' attitudes towards candidates rather than parties (Manin 1997: 219; Hayes & McAllister 1997:3). The impression that attitudes towards candidates have become more consequential in electoral dynamics has generated considerable interest in the question of what differentiates these from attitudes directed at parties. This literature has focused on the component of attitudes known as *impressions*, defined broadly as the *content* of attitudes. Far less attention has been devoted to exploring what differentiates party and candidate *evaluations* from each other. This thesis seeks to address this gap in the literature through both theoretical and empirical contributions. Specifically, it examines the claim, often made but not tested, that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations. Here, I present the background of the research question to be explored in the ensuing chapters. I then provide a succinct run-down of the structure of the thesis, and summarize the key findings.

## 1.1 Background and research question

In their classical account of voting behavior, Campbell and colleagues (1960) described the effect of candidate evaluations on vote decisions as idiosyncratic short-term forces which occasionally defy the otherwise pervasive grasp of partisan loyalties. Incidentally, the book's publication in 1960 marked the beginning of a trend towards an increasingly person-centered politics, with such incidents becoming more frequent (Wattenberg 1991). This trend, referred to in the literature as the personalization of politics, is a "process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines" (Rahat & Sheafer 2007: 65). This is evident for example in the growing tendency of citizens to vote on the basis of candidate evaluations (Garzia 2014; Hayes & McAllister 1997), and the increasing use of personalized campaign strategies to attract voters (Brettschneider 2008; Mancini & Swanson, 1996).

The literature identifies two primary causes of this trend. One is the advent of the "essentially personalized medium of television" (Mughan 2000: 129) which shifted the focus of news coverage from parties to candidates. The other is the erosion of traditional cleavage based politics which until the 1960s organized electoral activity around political parties. Freed from the "[the] social anchorage of the party" (Poguntke & Webb 2002, 14), voters turned toward "a more individualized and inwardly oriented style of political choice" (Garzia 2013, 67). This new style was individualized both in the sense that voters were more likely to omit group identity as the primary motivation for voting and instead base decisions on their own policy preferences and performance judgements, but also in the sense that they put greater emphasis on their evaluations of individual candidates (Garzia 2013, 67). As Wattenberg (1991: 2) explains:

The parties' ability to polarize opinion into rival camps weakened, creating a vacuum in the structure of electoral attitudes. Voters were thus set politically adrift and subject to volatile electoral swings. Like nature, politics abhors vacuum, and candidates are the most logical force to take the place of parties.

That candidates now play a greater role in the "structure of electoral attitudes" has far reaching consequences. Most of all in list-based parliamentary systems, which are party-centered by



institutional design. As Wagner and Wessels (2012: 73) explain, greater focus on candidates means that “the object evaluated in order to arrive at a vote choice would be a different one than the object of choice, i.e. (leading)candidates instead of parties.” This is more than a troubling discord between theory and practice. As politicians become the object of vote decisions, they “become the main anchor of interpretations and evaluations in the political process” (Adam & Maier 2010: 213). Because attitudes directed at parties are different from attitudes towards candidates, they inspire different kinds of support and opposition.

For this reason, political scientists have been keen to understand what differentiates attitudes directed at parties from attitudes directed at candidates. Underlying this inquiry is an normative question about what constitutes an appropriate object of vote decisions. A common concern is that focus on individuals “downplay the big social/political picture in favor of human triumphs and tragedies” (Adam & Maier 2010: 214). This concern is proceeds from the assumption that attitudes towards candidates are based on superficial evaluations of personality traits and appearance (Bennet 2002: 45; Keeter 1987: 356). Thus understood, personalization involves a shift in the “focus of politics from topics to people and from parties to politicians” (Adam & Maier 2010: 213). Other perspectives less critical of personalization counter that personality types and competence assessments are relevant and appropriate in vote decisions, and that candidate images in no small part are made up of policy considerations (Iyengar, 1989; Schulz & Zeh 2003).

This debate revolves around disagreements about the *content* of attitudes directed at parties and candidates. This is referred to in the attitude literature as *impressions*, meaning the attitude object’s representation in memory. Put differently, it is what we think about when we think about parties and candidates – our “knowledge and beliefs” about them (McGraw 2012: 187). This is a natural focus of the personalization literature since, It is commonly held, certain knowledge and beliefs are more appropriate foundations for voting behavior than others (Adam & Maier 2010).

However, impressions are only one component of attitudes. *Evaluations*, meaning negative or positive dispositions associated with an attitude object, is a related but analytically distinct concept (McGraw 2012; Ferguson & Fukukura 2010: 4). While impressions are mental

representation of information stored in memory, evaluations are summary judgements based on that information (McGraw 2012). In the classical definition, an evaluation is a “psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken 1993: 1). For voters, attitudes formed along this unidimensional spectrum are important means of orientation in the political landscape (Redlawsk, 2006: 3), and powerful predictors of voting behavior (Lodge & Taber: 2013). When deciding how to vote, what is known about a party or a candidate is one thing – the feeling of like or dislike elicited by that knowledge is another.

The crucial role of evaluations in vote-decisions is reflected in the personalization literature. Indeed, one common measure of personalization is the degree to which candidate evaluations rather than party evaluations influence voting behavior (Gattermann & De Vreese 2017). It is surprising, therefore, that the considerable efforts by political scientists to examine what differentiates party and candidate *impressions* is not matched by efforts to understand what differentiates party and candidate *evaluations*.

This gap in the literature is all the more surprising given the considerable, but persistently separate literatures devoted to understanding party and candidate evaluations. Studies that bring these topics together, and compare the processes involved party evaluations with those involved in candidate evaluations are conspicuously missing from the literature. The purpose of this thesis is to fill this gap, and thereby advance our understanding of the difference between a party and candidate-centered mode of democratic politics.

In so doing, the thesis focuses specifically on the role of partisan bias in party and candidate evaluations. The claim that candidates are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations has a long history in the political science literature. It appears in Campbell and colleague’s (1960) claim that voting behavior deviating from the ubiquitous effect of party identification could be explained by the appeal of popular candidates. Moreover, the frequently stressed association between personalized and volatile voting behavior suggests that attitudes directed at candidates are less beholden to stable identities. At the same time, so-called “catch-all” parties are said to employ leader-centered campaign strategies in conscious efforts to attract voters

beyond their traditional base (Krouwel 2003: 29). The ability of candidate evaluations to cut through partisan divides is frequently used as an explanation of these trends, but is rarely taken as the thing to be explained. Doing so means looking at party and candidate evaluations in a comparative framework. This is the approach used in this thesis with the aim of answering the following research question:

*Are candidate evaluations less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations?*

## 1.2 Contributions to the literature

In answering this question, the thesis will make several contributions. First, by focusing on party and candidate evaluations, it adds another dimension to the literature on what differentiates attitudes directed at parties from attitudes directed at candidates. Second, it makes a theoretical contribution by introducing concepts from social psychology not previously used in the political attitude literature. Third, it explores the research question in two empirical studies. The first is to my knowledge the first experimental study which compares party and candidate evaluations. The second examines the question in a dynamic campaign setting, using a Bayesian learning model as an “accounting device” to estimate the use of old and new information in party and candidate evaluations, and the extent to which new information is subject to partisan bias (Bartels 1993: 268)

## 1.3 Structure of the thesis

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### 1.3 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is made up of four chapters in addition to this one. Chapter two presents the theoretical framework which provides the foundation for the hypotheses to be tested in the ensuing chapters. It begins by presenting the classical approaches to political attitudes, and considers their limitations in relation to the research question. Since they view attitudes as direct responses to socio-political phenomena, they are insufficiently sensitive to the cognitive processes involved in attitude formation. I argue that evaluations are summary judgements associatively linked in memory with an attitude object, and that the association between the attitude and the object can fluctuate in degree of accessibility. I introduce a theoretical framework developed by Hamilton and Sherman (1996: 336) to explain why forming attitudes towards individual persons and groups “engage different mechanisms for processing information and making judgements.” In adapting this framework to party and candidate evaluations, I claim that party evaluations less responsive to new information than candidate evaluations. Moreover, I consider how the dynamic involved in party and candidate evaluations it interacts with partisan motivated reasoning. On this basis, I present the proposition that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

Chapter three tests this proposition through a survey experiment conducted on a representative sample of Norwegian citizens. The experiment is designed to portray attitude formation during a political campaign leading up to a municipal election in Norway. By exposing respondents to the same information, and manipulating the target of that information, it is shown that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations. However, this is a double edged sword. While respondents evaluating out-group targets are more responsive to new information about individual candidates than parties, respondents evaluating in-group targets are also more responsive to negative information about candidates than parties. This fits with the impression that candidate-centered voting is more volatile than party-centered voting.

Chapter four explores party and candidate evaluations during the run-up to the 2017 German federal election. The purpose of this chapter is to explore party and candidate evaluations in a dynamic information environment. Rather than examining the effects of specific pieces of information, it examines the *overall* effects of information on party and candidate evaluations. That is, it examines the use of information in party and candidate evaluations whilst remaining

agnostic about the quality and quantity of that information. Accordingly, the chapter is less concerned with pinning down the cognitive micro-processes involved in attitude formation than mapping out a broader picture of the use of information during a political campaign. In so doing, it uses a Bayesian learning model as an “accounting device” to estimate the use of old and new information in party and candidate evaluations, and the extent to which new information is subject to partisan bias (Bartels 1993: 268). The results corroborates the main finding from chapter 3, that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

The final chapter sums up the findings of the previous chapters, and suggests avenues for future research. It is concluded that the two empirical studies provide strong support for the proposition that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

## **Party and leader evaluations: An information processing perspective**

We relate to individuals in a different way than we relate to collective entities. As the attention of voters shifts from parties to candidates, this should be accounted for in the theory of political attitudes. In this chapter, I introduce the conceptual framework developed by Hamilton and Sherman to explain differences in perceptions of individuals and groups, and make a case for its relevance in the study of political attitudes. I begin by identifying limitations in traditional approaches to political attitudes. I argue that they are insufficiently sensitive to the role of cognitive limitations in attitude formation, and therefore overlook important considerations that influence how evaluations are formed and change over time. One of these is what is known as entitativity, meaning the degree to which the attitude object appears as a discrete and coherent entity. In adapting this concept to the political context, I consider how it interacts with partisan motivated reasoning. Based on this discussion, I propose that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

### **2.1 Theories of attitude formation**

Political scientists tend to view evaluations as direct responses to socio-political phenomena. Accordingly, attitudes towards specific objects are viewed as incidental to their position in the political context. That is, party and candidate evaluations are not evaluations of parties and candidates as such, but responses to socio political variables. In this section, I present the social identity and rational choice perspectives traditionally used to explain political attitude formation and explain their limitations.

### 2.1.1 The Social Identity perspective

According to the social identity perspective, political attitudes result from citizens' fundamental need to cultivate social relationships. Put simply, people are first and foremost social beings who "think of themselves as members of a group, attach emotional significance to their membership and adjust their behaviour to conform to group norms" (Bartle & Bellucci, 2009: 5). The impulse to seek acceptance from the social group is therefore a catalyst for a broad range of behavior, including attitude formation. The comparatively obscure project of making sense of the wider world is an appendage to this overriding impulse. Opinions about politics, for most people a remote subject, is subsumed under the need to cultivate relationships with family, neighbours, colleagues and other individuals they interact with on a regular basis (Bartle & Bellucci 2009; p. 8).

According to the most influential iteration of social identity theory, the so-called Michigan model, the impulse to seek membership of a social group is in the political realm serviced by the political party. Accordingly, party identification is the primary determinant of political attitudes (Campbell *et al.* 1960). Specifically, party identification acts as a "perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation." (Campbell *et al.* 1960: 133). Thus:

[P]arty has a profound influence across the full range of political objects to which the individual voter responds. The strength of relationship between party identification and the dimensions of partisan attitude suggests that responses to each element of national politics are deeply affected by the individual's enduring partisan attachments. (Campbell *et al.* 1960, p. 128)

As this excerpt makes clear, party identification is not simply an attitude directed at the party itself, but an "organizing device for the voters' political evaluations and judgements" (Dalton, 2000: 20). This includes evaluations and judgements directed at individual candidates. As Campbell and colleagues (1960: 128) explain:

[A] party undoubtedly furnishes a powerful set of cues about a political leader just by nominating him for President. Merely associating the party symbol with his name encourages those identifying with the party to develop a more favorable image of his record and experience, his abilities, and his other personal attributes. (Campbell et al., 1960: p. 128).

Amongst its defining characteristics, party identification is stable over time. It is formed in childhood or early adulthood, and persists until death, or a radical change in life situation triggers a move between social groups. It is essentially a “prepolitical attitude” (Johnston, 2006: 329), and is rarely influenced by ongoing political events. Party identities, as Bartels (2002: 117) puts it, are the “unmoved movers of more specific political attitudes and behavior” (Bartels, 2002: 117). In stark terms, party identification can be seen as “an exogenous variable affecting politics but not being affected by politics” (Holmberg, 2007, p. 563).

According to the Michigan model, then, a person’s attitudes towards a particular object is incidental to that object’s position within the social structure. That is, attitude change is not a function of the properties of the attitude object, but proceeds from changes in the social cleavage structure, or the subject’s position within it. Since attitudes towards different political objects emanate from the same source (party identification), comparing attitude formation across objects is not an immediate concern. Campbell and colleagues’ own discussion on the difference between party and candidate evaluations is instructive in this regard. They recognized that feelings towards political parties are not perfect correlates of attitudes towards their candidates, and that the latter in some cases could determine election outcomes independently of the former. However, these outlier cases were treated as “idiosyncratic short-term forces” (Miller *et al.* 1986: 522). Thus, “the [Michigan model] provides no theoretical principle to guide investigation of the content of candidate image that is not apparently a product of this partisan screening process” (Brown *et al.* 1988: 730). It does not explain how or why party and candidate evaluations differ, even if it suggests that they do.

### *2.1.2 The rational choice perspective*

Social identity theory was well placed to explain the stable class-based cleavage structures of the US postwar era. However, volatile voting behavior and new forms of political involvement from the 1960s onwards cast doubt on its ability to provide a comprehensive explanation of voting behavior. It soon became clear that partisanship should not after all be understood as a stable



identity, but is in fact malleable and responsive to political events. It was understood that “[p]arty identification is shaping behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions at the same time as it is shaped by attitudes and perceptions” (Holmberg, 2007, p. 562).

Around the same time, European scholars argued that party identification could not account for voting behavior in multiparty systems, where voters regularly moved between parties and evidently felt a measure of partisan attachment towards multiple parties at once (Pappi, 1996). Claims of this nature suggested that a scalar conception of partisanship was more appropriate than the binary in/out group model suggested by social identity theory. For this reason, some scholars argued that partisanship should be understood as a positive or negative dispositional like/dislike attitude like any other (Converse 1995; Garzia, 2013).

In the 1970s, a group of “revisionists” openly questioned the Michigan-model's nonpolitical conception of partisanship, emphasising the role of cognitive factors in shaping political attitudes (Fiorina: 1981). This cognitive turn is often associated with rational choice theories which postulate that dispositional attitudes are the result of rational assessments of political events. That is to say, attitudes are based on “ideas about the way the world is, the way the world should be and the chief means of getting from one to the other” (Bartle & Bellucci 2009: 14). The paradigmatic example of this tradition is the Downsian spatial model, which represents voting decisions as a choice between policy options spread along a left-right axis (Downs 1957). In this model, issue proximity is the basis of voters’ attitudes towards parties or politicians (Garzia 2014: 26). Other models in this tradition base attitude formation on retrospective performance evaluations (Fiorina: 1981) and prospective competence assessments (Bellucci 2006), but the underlying principle is the same.

Like the social identity perspective, rational choice theory is insufficiently sensitive to the role of attitude objects in shaping the dynamics of attitude formation. What matters is not what type of object is under consideration, but its perceived association with some desired outcome. In stark terms, voters do not evaluate politicians or parties, but the policy outcomes they represent. As Lodge and colleagues (1990: 10) put it, “Candidates [or parties] are viewed as alternative policy

choices open to the voter”. From the rational choice perspective, the lack of interest in the role of different attitude objects in shaping the process of attitude formation can therefore be explained by the fact that it is simply not the kind of thing a rational voter would worry about. It does not matter whether the attitude object is a party or candidate as long as it delivers the desirable results. If social identity theory is insufficiently cognitive, rational choice theory errs in the opposite direction.

### *2.1.3 Attitude strength and symbolic attitudes in party and leader evaluations*

Although the classical formulations of social identity and rational choice theory does not provide a theoretical framework for the comparison of party and candidate evaluation, the perennial debate between the two has proved fruitful in this regard. In particular, efforts have been made to explain the stability of party attitudes projected by the Michigan model, whilst recognizing that such attitudes should not be understood as dichotomous in/out-group identities, but as evaluations – that is, like and dislike not unlike attitudes directed at other objects. In this context, it has been argued that attitudes towards parties “may be stronger than those associated with other objects”, and are therefore “likely to have some of the same consequences as identities” (Bartle & Bellucci 2009: 5). That is, they “will endure, will resist attempts at persuasion in contrary directions, will exert influence on formation of related perceptions and beliefs, and – perhaps most important – will predict behavioral decisions with highest fidelity” (Converse 1995: xi). If attitudes directed at parties are systematically stronger than attitudes directed at individual candidates, the dynamics of attitude formation should differ in party and candidate evaluations. This perspective may be articulated within both the rational choice and social identity frameworks.

In the rational choice tradition, the logic of retrospective evaluations provides an intuitive explanation of the stability of partisan attitudes. As we learn more information about an object, our attitude towards it become more accurate, and therefore a more precise reflections of our personal interests. New information is therefore less likely to result in attitude change. This basic idea has been formalized in Bayesian learning models which explain attitude change as a function of the precision of new information and the strength of prior beliefs (Gerber & Green 1998; Bullock 2009). In such models, parties may be expected to generate particularly strong

priors due to the prevalence and accessibility of information about them. As Bartle and Bellucci (2009: 17) put it:

Since parties dominate every level of government, have associations with many social groups, take positions on a range of issues and structure the terms of the political debate, it seems only too reasonable to infer that voters have pre-formed attitudes towards these objects.

Within the social identity tradition, early socialization provides an explanation of the strength of partisan attitudes. Sears (1983) formulates a version of this argument through the concept of symbolic and non-symbolic attitudes. Whereas nonsymbolic attitudes “change easily in response to persuasive arguments and to changes in the objective political world”, symbolic attitudes are stable beliefs formed early in life through a “conditioning-like process” (Krosnick 1991: 548). He further proposes a hierarchy of symbolic attitudes, ranging from highly symbolic to non-symbolic with party identification being the most symbolic.<sup>1</sup> Although Sears’ model does not include explicit provision for attitudes directed at individual politicians, the fact that such attitudes are rarely formed early in life suggests that they are comparatively non-symbolic.

There are obvious empirical differences between these perspectives. In particular, the retrospective evaluations model hypothesizes volatile partisan attitudes in inexperienced young adults, whereas symbolic attitudes are thought to be inherited from parents very early in life. However, one important proposition is shared by both: attitudes towards parties are less responsive to new information than attitudes towards other objects, and tend to be more stable over time. This is in line with the hypotheses to be tested in this thesis. However, as it stands, the theoretical framework is somewhat unsatisfying. As Krosnick (1991: 571) notes, “focusing on the attitude object may not be the most effective way to distinguish strong attitudes from weak ones. Any given political attitude is likely to be strong among some individuals and weak among

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<sup>1</sup> The full hierarchy: (1) political party identification, (2) liberal-conservative ideological orientation, (3) attitudes toward social groups, (4) attitudes on racial policy issues, (5) attitudes on nonracial policy issues, and (6) attitudes regarding political efficacy and trust in government (Krosnick 1991: 548)

others.” Many factors may influence the strength of people’s attitudes towards particular object types. For example, it is likely that attitudes towards parties are less strong in multi-party systems, such as in Germany and Norway, in which voters regularly vote for different parties, than in the US two-party system. Moreover, the process of personalization may be understood precisely as a waning of the strength of attitudes towards parties in relation to attitudes directed at candidates, in which case the claim that attitude strength provides an explanation of systematic differences in attitudes towards parties in relation to other objects mistakes historical contingency for law.

More pressingly, understanding party identification as a particularly strong attitude confounds two analytically distinct concepts: the sense of belonging to a group, and the psychological phenomenon of feeling a like or dislike towards an attitude object. This distinction is clearly illustrated by the fact that a sense of shared identity with an attitude object is compatible with a feeling of dislike towards it, just as it is possible to like an object identified with another group. As Greene (2002: 184) explains:

While there is undoubtedly a correlation between the value of one’s group membership and a positive attitude toward a party, they are distinct psychological concepts. One can imagine giving a party a high score without actually belonging, much as one might give a high feeling thermometer rating to “Blacks” or “poor people” without being a member of either group.

Party identity should therefore not be understood in terms of evaluations, but as a sense of group membership which interacts with the cognitive processes involved in forming evaluations of political objects, *including* the party itself. This distinction, therefore, is crucial, and this thesis examines candidate and party evaluations in the context *of in* and *out-group* attitudes. Specifically, it explores whether candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations. To this end, we need a theoretical framework which explains how the processes involved in evaluating parties and candidates interact with party identities. In what follows, I propose a theoretical framework which explains differences in party and candidate

evaluations based on the properties of the attitude object, and the psychological processes involved in forming attitudes about them.

## 2.2 The information processing perspective

Attitude formation involves complex cognitive processes that are influenced by a large number of factors. One of these is the perceived entitativity of the attitude object, meaning the degree to which it is perceived as abstract or concrete. In this section I present the cognitive psychology perspective on attitude formation before introducing the concept of entitativity and its use in the study of evaluations of groups and individuals.

### 2.2.1 Attitudes as “pictures in the head”

The theoretical perspective to be developed in the remainder of this chapter proceeds from an important shortcoming in the social identity and rational choice theories of attitude formation. At first glance, these perspectives seem polar opposites. The former claims that citizens unconsciously inherit attitudes from their immediate social surroundings, whilst the latter claims that attitudes are arrived at consciously, through rational deliberation. Despite these differences, however, they are both examples of what Lodge and colleagues (1990: 5) call “memory based models”. Although they present different accounts of how information is transformed into attitudes, both assume that once received, information is easily stored in memory for seamless retrieval at the time of attitude formation. That is to say, they do not “explain how citizens actually go about recalling remembered information, or choosing what information to recall, or how recalled information gets integrated into a summary judgment” (Lodge *et al.* 1990: 13). This is done mechanically, through a “perceptual screen” in the one case, and rational deliberation in the other. Both perspectives are therefore based on “black-box (stimulus in, response out) models of choice: campaign events in, recollections and evaluations out” (Lodge *et al.* 1990: 13).

In political science, the idea that attitude formation is subject to cognitive limitations is usually attributed to Walter Lippmann, who noted that “(t)he world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported and imagined” (Lippmann, 2009: 336). His key insight was that the unavoidable tasks of *exploring*, *reporting* and *imagining* which underlie attitude formation are cognitively taxing, and involve a mix of

conscious and unconscious mental processes. Information about “the world outside” (Lippmann: 2009, 323) is not accessed directly, but passes through imperfect cognitive processes on its way to attitude formation. This truism from psychology, which began its cognitive revolution in the 1950s, has been slow to catch on amongst political scientists who prefer to view political attitudes as direct responses to meso and macro-political phenomena (t’ Hart 2010: 102). As Lau and Redlawsk (2006: 21) note, however, “there is nothing special about the political environment that should cause people to overcome magically the limitations of human cognition.”

In Lippman’s (2009: 323) enduring words, the process of forming attitudes towards political objects begins with an attempt to represent them as “pictures in our heads”. In contemporary terminology, the notion of a mental image is better understood as a network of information (or *nodes*) connected to the attitude object via neural pathways. The mention of a particular politician triggers associations with other affectively laden objects stored in memory, such as “conservative”, “incompetent”, “abortion”, etc., which together produce an emotional response (Berent & Krosnick 1995: 95). Accordingly, “an attitude” is defined as a “summary evaluation that is associatively linked in memory with the object of that evaluation” (Ferguson & Fukukura, 2012: 166).

This definition is sensitive to the cognitively demanding processes involved in information storage and retrieval. Far from a mechanical process, attitude formation is “the result of a dynamic process involving the building of some construct”, and “reflects the perceiver’s effort to impose structure on the assortment of facts that he or she has received” (McGraw & Steenbergen, 1995: 16). As McGraw (2003: 398) explains:

Impression formation is [...] a dynamic, constructive process, evolving over time. New information is incorporated, and impressions are systematically, and sometimes not so systematically, revised. These revisions can occur at a slow, imperceptible pace, or they can be dramatic and palpable (left-leaning readers might consider their impressions of President Bush or Mayor Giuliani before and after September 11, 2001).

The processes underlying attitude formation depends on the particulars of the cognitive task, and as McGraw's example shows, it can be of immense political consequence. Clearly, it is in the interest of political science to get a handle on the dynamics that govern them.

### 2.2.2 *The concept of entitativity*

"Black box" models are not sensitive to differences in the cognitive processes involved in evaluations of different attitude objects. Positive and negative inputs are transformed into summary judgements in exactly the same way irrespective of whether the target is a party or a candidate. However, the information processing perspective just presented provides the outlines of the central proposition to be developed in this section: constructing a mental image of a party is not the same as constructing a mental image of a party leader, and it involves a different set of cognitive processes.

This proposition proceeds from the concept of *entitativity*, meaning "the degree of being entitative. The degree of having the nature of an entity, of having real existence" (Campbell 1960: 190). Put differently, entitativity relates to the degree to which an attitude object appears to the perceiver as a coherent and unified whole. This influences how information is integrated into a summary judgment. Consider the example of forming an impression of a jazz orchestra:

It is true that some of the data reported by human organs seem more substantial than others. One sees a saxophone and hears the atmospheric disturbances to which it gives rise, but one cannot see or hear or touch or smell the group relationships which in some perplexing manner bind the members of the jazz orchestra together. The first surmise that each member is wholly independent of the others in thought and action eventually breaks down, and it is perceived that they have organization, but the organization seems less tangible than the saxophone (Rice 1928, in Campbell 1960: 188)

The orchestra offers clues about its nature, as does the saxophone, but these are of a very different kind. So too are the processes whereby the perceiver integrates these clues into a coherent image.

More in line with the themes of this thesis, Hamilton and Sherman (1996: 336) used the concept of entitativity to demonstrate that forming attitudes towards individual persons and groups “engage different mechanisms for processing information and making judgements.” They observed that a person is generally “expected to be an organized entity; he or she is the same person, with the same personality, yesterday, today, and tomorrow” (Hamilton & Sherman 1996: 337). The perceiver therefore expects a high level of conformity in the traits and behavior of individual persons, and “strives to capture this unity during the process of forming an impression.” (Hamilton & Sherman 1996: 337). Given this assumption of unity, any new information about the individual’s traits and behavior is taken to “reflect the target person’s inherent nature or essence, the main themes of his or her personality.” If this information is inconsistent with prior beliefs, it will be met with a conscious effort to generate a coherent, up-to-date attitude. Accordingly, attitude formation about individual targets is associated with integrative, or *online*, information processing characterized by general responsiveness to new information.

When confronted with expectation-inconsistent information about an individual person, we are prompted to think along the following lines: “Hey, what’s going on here? Why did she do that? That doesn’t fit with my impression of her at all.” (Hamilton & Sherman 1996: 338). Unexpected information about a group, however, is unlikely to induce a response like this, in part because it is far from obvious that groups are purposive entities capable of *doing* things. Thinking of a group as a causal agent involves the complex cognitive process of *attribution*, whereby a person is seen as acting on behalf of others. Thus people rarely explain group behavior in terms of agentive *reasons*, relying instead on *causal histories of reasons*; “factors that preceded and brought about the agent’s reason” (O’Laughlin & Malle 2002: 33). Whilst certain conditions facilitate social attribution, such as perceived similarity amongst group members (Yzerbyt *et al.* 1998), it is generally the case that people do not “expect the same degree of unity and coherence among members of a group as they expect in the personality of an individual person” (Hamilton & Sherman 1996: 339).

Because individuals are less likely to view groups as internally consistent units, they have greater tolerance for expectation-inconsistent information about them, and less motivation to integrate



such information into a summary judgment. As a result, attitude formation about group targets is less responsive to new information, and is less likely to be updated *on-line*. Instead, it is *retrospective* in that it is based on schematic information stored in memory, so-called stereotypes. In short, “concrete entities allow for more flexible, context-dependent judgements whereas abstract entities are more likely to be judged by context insensitive precomputed expectancies.” (Sherman et al. 2015: 243).

## 2.3 Party and candidate evaluations

The role of entitativity in the formation of attitudes towards groups and individuals is well documented. However, parties are particular types of groups, and candidates particular kinds of individuals. This section applies the concept of entitativity to the political context. First, I consider previous use of entitativity and related concepts in the political science literature. Then, I review the separate literatures on party and candidate evaluations and consider whether previous research is consistent with expectations based on the theory of entitativity. Finally, I make the case for applying the concept to party and candidate evaluations. In so doing, the role of partisan motivated reasoning must be accounted for.

### *2.3.1 Entitativity and related concepts in the political science literature*

The concept of entitativity is not entirely without precedent in the political science literature. Lodge and Taber (2005: 457) have previously considered the possibility that entitativity impacts on the automaticity of attitude formation about political issues, presidential candidates and political groups (Lodge & Taber 2005). Furthermore, McGraw and Ling (2003) citing Hamilton and Sherman’s research, conducted an experiment which shows that evaluations of an individual candidate (Bill Clinton) are more responsive to information effects than evaluations of political groups (feminists). Similarly, Riggle (1992) found that citizens use an integrative mode of information processing when evaluating a single candidate, but turned to a heuristic strategy when evaluating two candidates. Moreover, a similar concept has been applied to policy evaluations, which is said to trigger a cognitively complex process of weighing pros and cons, preventing the voter from forming a summative judgement (Zaller & Feldman 1992). As McGraw explains, the number of independent dimensions underlying the attitude is relevant for

the formation of that attitude, with more complex information processing tasks being associated with moderate attitudes (McGraw, 2002).

In the present case, the application of entitativity is based on the following reasoning: political parties, like other groups, are neither seen nor heard, and must be inferred from the traits and behaviors of individuals that represent them. These are not always coherent, and integrating a variety of information about a party into a summary judgement is more cumbersome than doing the same for an individual politician. Accordingly, it is expected that candidate evaluations involve an integrative style of information processing, while party evaluations are more reliant on schemas stored in memory. Some tentative support for the theory may be found in the literatures on the dynamics of party and leader/candidate evaluations. Just as research on the perceptions of individuals and groups had followed two distinct paths before Hamilton and Sherman brought them together under a single theoretical framework, research on attitudes towards parties and candidates has been largely separate fields of inquiry within the political science literature, and relies on different conceptual tools.

### *2.3.2 Party and leader evaluations in the literature*

Of the two, the literature on candidate evaluations makes the most frequent use of information processing perspectives. In line with expectations derived from the theory of entitativity, a series of experiments conducted by Lodge and colleagues demonstrates that candidate evaluations are largely formed *online*, with voters “spontaneously culling the affective value from each specific candidate message, and immediately integrating these assessments into a “running tally” that holds the individual's summary evaluation of the candidate” (Lodge *et al.* 1995: 310-311; see also McGraw *et al.* 1990; Lodge 1995; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Rahn, Aldrich, and Borgida 1990). Although this literature does not compare candidate evaluations with evaluations of parties, and rarely considers other attitude objects, it is frequently noted that the findings may be particular to the case of candidate evaluations. For example, Redlawsk (2006: 88) notes that it “appears clear that person-evaluation tasks, of which candidate evaluation certainly is one, are routinely processed online.” Similarly, (Greene 2004: 13) notes the possibility “that candidate evaluation is somehow unique and the dynamics and

media coverage of a political campaign favor online processing in a way that does not occur for ordinary political attitudes.”

While studies on candidate evaluations have focused on psychological micro-processes, the vast literature on party attitudes is characterized by more conventional approaches grounded in social identity and rational choice theory. Although determining the impact of information effects on party attitudes has been a major aim, this has mainly been done through observational studies which rely on indirect measures of information effects such as performance assessments (Fiorina 1981; Franklin & Jackson 1983; Gerber & Green 1998). Moreover, different conceptualizations of party attitudes (including thermometer ratings, ideological proximity and performance assessments to name a few) display vastly different levels of responsiveness to information effects (Green & Baltes 2017). Although some experimental studies examine information effects in controlled environments, these have focused on party identification rather than evaluations (Lupu 2013; Green & Pande 2012). Accordingly, the results cannot be directly compared with candidate evaluations. All in all, the literatures are too diverse to draw any conclusions about differences or similarities in party and candidate evaluations, or whether the empirical patterns are in line with expectations based on the theory of entitativity.

### *2.3.3 Entitativity and partisan motivated reasoning*

Early research on entitativity and attitude formation was conducted in heavily controlled experimental contexts where the profiles of the individual and group targets under evaluation were designed to be as neutral as possible. In a political context, however, it cannot be assumed that the perceiver is a neutral observer. As Leeper and Slothuus (2014: 130) note, “*political* psychology cannot be understood without an account of *partisan* psychology”. Evidently, groups are perceived differently from outside than from within, and members of one’s own group are viewed with greater charity than members of a rival group. An account of how the singularity effect impacts on attitude formation in the context of electoral competition must therefore consider how it interacts with *in* and *out*-group tendencies.

As noted above, the Michigan model conceptualizes such tendencies through the concept of party identity, which acts as a “perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell *et al.* 1960: 133). However, as Lodge and colleagues (1991, 1371) explain:

The notion of a ‘perceptual screen’ is a rather static and limited view of cognitive processes. The metaphor of a screen suggests that some information passes through while other information does not, and it focuses our attention on the acquisition of information while ignoring its storage and retrieval from memory.

As a cognitively informed alternative, Taber and Lodge (2006) suggests the theory of *motivated reasoning*. It proceeds from the premise that all attitude formation is goal oriented. Although one can have many goals, they focus on two broad categories; “accuracy goals” motivate individuals to “seek out and carefully consider relevant evidence so as to reach a correct or otherwise best solution,” and “directional goals” motivate them to “apply their reasoning powers in defense of prior, specific conclusions” (2006: 756). Concretely, directional goals imbue partisans with the twin impulses to place greater weight on evidence which *confirms* prior beliefs, whilst also de-emphasizing *disconfirming* evidence which challenges them (Lodge & Taber 2006).

There is little doubt that both party and candidate evaluation are subject to partisan motivated reasoning. Parties, being the object of partisan association, are obviously seen through partisan lenses, but there is also ample evidence that directional goals play a considerable role in candidate evaluations. For example, Redlawsk (2002: 1022) finds that “candidate evaluation may be more about reinforcing existing feelings about candidates than about revising them in the face of new information”. Rahn (1993) also finds clear evidence that partisan cues facilitate stereotypical assessments of candidates, triggering a retrospective mode of attitude formation. However, a closer examination of how these information processing biases interact with the information processing strategies associated with entitativity provides several reasons to expect

candidate evaluations to be less susceptible to partisan motivated reasoning than party evaluations.

In general, intergroup interactions tend to be more hostile and competitive than interindividual interactions, and are therefore strongly influenced by directional goals in attitude formation (see Wildschut *et al.* 2003 for review). Moreover, this tendency is enhanced when *in* and *out*-groups are perceived as united by a common purpose. This is facilitated by several factors typical to political parties, such as *procedural interdependence* (meaning there is “an interrelationship of group members' behavior and outcomes”<sup>2</sup> (Wildschut *et al.* 2003 259)), and the use of flags and logos to signify group affiliation (Callahan & Ledgerwood 2016). These factors enhance the perceived entitativity of the group, and in neutral circumstances would promote an integrative style of information processing, as unexpected information forces a reconsideration of existing beliefs. However, in the context of partisan motivated reasoning, the perception of a group as homogeneous instead provides an impetus to exclude information which challenge directional goals. As Lewis and Sherman (2010: 213) explain, “(b)y classifying a negative in-group member as a “bad example” (or the “black-sheep” of the group), individuals can justify excluding the deviant member from the overall group evaluation.”

Similarly, positive information about an out-group may easily be explained away as an exception to the rule (Rothbart & Park 2003). In contrast, behaviors that fit with the observer’s negative perception is readily attributed to the group as a whole, further confirming existing beliefs. In effect, the already complicated process of social attribution involved in party evaluations is easily captured by (dis)confirmation bias. Although this idea can be formulated using the concept of entitativity and motivated reasoning, it is also common sense. It is captured by the following quote by Albert Einstein:

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<sup>2</sup> For example because group decisions are made by “a consensus requirement or majority rule” (Wildschut *et al.* 2003).

If my theory of relativity is proven successful, Germany will claim me as a German and France will declare me a citizen of the world. Should my theory prove untrue, France will say that I am a German, and Germany will declare that I am a Jew.

The quote speaks to the ease with which a collective and abstract entity may be disassociated from information which goes against the directional goals of the perceiver, or associated with information that affirms them. This is not as easily done when evaluating an individual person. Moreover the fact that the individual can be dissociated as a strategy to hold on to stereotype judgement, is clearly an important difference between party and candidate evaluations. This suggests that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan motivated reasoning than party evaluations. This is the proposition to be tested in the ensuing chapters of thesis.

#### *2.3.4 Entitativity and the malleability of party and leader images*

Before moving on to the empirical chapters, one important caveat to the theory must be addressed. The recognition that political attitudes are unreliably constructed mental images has far reaching consequences. Crucially, it questions the core idea that attitude formation is a function of the attitude object. If political attitudes are not direct effects of “the world out there”, but are influenced by a variety of cognitive processes, they are in part subjective, and therefore malleable. After all, “different ways of thinking about politics can lead to different ways of relating to politics” (Garzia, 2014: p. 41). At the extreme, this disconnect between attitude objects and their representation in the imagination of voters is associated with the assertion that elections are “entirely about image not reality” (in Davies & Mian 2010: 332).

This invokes the idea that attitudes are somehow arbitrary and that their formation is not subject to empirical regularities. Perhaps more concerning, it can be taken to suggest that they are susceptible to deliberate “impression management” (McGraw 2003: 409). The proliferation of political advertising and spin suggests that this is at least partly true. More relevant to the present case, several studies suggest that parties are increasingly leveraging the malleability of their own image in efforts to adapt to an increasingly personalized politics, for example by employing leader-centered campaign strategies (Farrell and Webb, 2000). Given this, it has been suggested that voters are not in fact shifting their attention *away* from political parties, but are instead

associating the parties more closely with their leaders (Midtbø 1997; Garzia 2013). Thus understood, personalization is not premised on a party/leader dichotomy, according to which one gains prominence at the expense of the other. Instead, party leaders are increasingly “personifying the policy platforms of their respective parties” (McAllister 2007, p. 574). As Garzia (...: 19) notes, “[t]he ever more evident overlap between the image of the party and the image of the leader has eventually blurred the contour between the two”. On the face of it, the malleability of party and candidate images calls into question the idea that they are analytically distinct categories that citizens evaluate in systematically different ways.

This is an important caveat to the ability of the theory of entitativity to explain differences in party and candidate evaluations. Entitativity does not in fact refer to the objective reality of the attitude object, but how it is constructed in the mind of the perceiver. This is influenced by several factors. For example, groups that are formed with a clear goal in mind, such as an orchestra, are generally perceived as having a higher degree of entitativity than haphazardly formed groups, like a random selection of people waiting at a bus-stop (Lickel et al. 2000). Similarly, a party which is associated closely with its leader is likely to be viewed as more entitative than a party with a less hierarchical structure. In an experiment drawing on the entitativity literature, McGraw and Dolan (2007) found that associating states are evaluated using *on-line* information processing strategies when associated with their political leader, whereas describing a state as a parliamentary institution produces weaker attitudes and *memory*-based information processing. This is likely the case in party evaluations as well. However, examining the conditions that influence the perceived entitativity of a political party is beyond the scope of this thesis. It proceeds on the assumption that parties in general are perceived as less entitative than individual candidates.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The social identity and rational choice theories traditionally used to explain political attitudes are not equipped to account for differences in party and candidate evaluations. Since they treat political attitudes as direct consequences of sociopolitical phenomena, they fail to take account of the crucial role of cognitive processes in attitude formation. The concept of entitativity is a valuable addition to the literature, and can improve our understanding of political attitudes. This

thesis examines how it interacts with partisan motivated reasoning in party and candidate evaluations.

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## Party and candidate evaluations in a Norwegian municipal election *A survey experiment*

In the personalization literature, it is often claimed that individual candidates have an advantage over collective entities like parties in their ability to reach across partisan divides and appeal to new voters. This claim is mainly used as an explanation of the ongoing process of personalization, and is rarely treated as a phenomenon to be examined in its own right. The theoretical framework developed in the previous chapter provides the starting point for such an inquiry. Through a survey experiment conducted on a representative sample of Norwegian citizens, this chapter shows that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations. However, this is a double-edged sword. While respondents evaluating out-group targets were more responsive to positive information about individual candidates than parties, respondents evaluating in-group targets were also more responsive to negative information about candidates than parties.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I present the hypothesis and justify the case selection. I then present the research design, and explain the experimental procedure. Finally, I present and analyze the results, which support the proposition that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

### 3.1 Hypotheses and case selection

The theory presented in the previous chapter provides the basis for testable hypotheses about differences between party and candidate evaluations. In this section, I present two hypotheses which suggest that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than leader evaluations. These hypotheses are supplemented with an ancillary exploration of gender effects in candidate evaluations, also presented in this section. Finally, I suggest some advantages of testing the hypotheses on a representative sample of Norwegian citizens.

#### 3.1.1 Hypotheses

Attitudes are made up of two related, but analytically distinct elements. *Impressions* are mental representations consisting of one's "knowledge and beliefs" about an object (McGraw 2012: 187). That is, impressions are information stored in memory about some attitude object. The second element is evaluations. Evaluations are negative or positive dispositions associated with an attitude object, usually thought of as summary judgements of impressions stored in memory (McGraw 2012).

Intuitively, party and candidate impressions differ in important ways. When forming an impression of an individual person, we rely on characteristics not typically applied to political parties, such as personality traits, appearance and competence assessments. As voters are growing more attuned to individual candidates, and increasingly base voting decisions on feelings towards them, the content of candidate impressions has become an important topic of research. In this context, it is sometimes argued focus on persons is focus turned away from politically salient topics associated with party images. Thus Adam and Maier (2010: 213) define personalization as a shift in "focus of politics from topics to people and from parties to politicians."

The differences between party and candidate evaluations has received less attention. As the previous chapter showed, they are not adequately accounted for in the traditional theories of political attitude formation. However, theoretical frameworks developed by social psychologists to explain differences in evaluations of individuals and groups may be of use. The previous chapter argued that the process whereby impressions are integrated into summary evaluations depends on the properties of the object under evaluation. Specifically, it was argued that in

accordance with the theory of entitativity, party evaluations are less responsive to new information than candidate evaluations.

The experimental method is the natural way to explore whether this is the case. It allows the researcher to hold the flow of information constant, and manipulate only the attitude object. Using this approach, McGraw and Ling (2003) observed that evaluations of an individual candidate (Bill Clinton) are more responsive to information effects than evaluations of political groups (feminists). This chapter extends this research in two important ways. First, it compares information effects on candidate and party evaluations, a dichotomy which is increasingly relevant given the ongoing process of personalization. Second, it explores whether the dynamics of party and candidate evaluations interact with partisan motivated reasoning.

The theory proposed in the previous chapter suggests that party evaluations are more susceptible to partisan motivated reasoning than candidate evaluations. The abstract and collective nature of parties facilitates the disconfirmation of information which conflicts with partisan predispositions. Positive information about an out-group party may easily be explained away as an exception to the rule, and functionally excluded from the attitude formation. In contrast, the expectation of internal unity in individual targets promotes a more integrative style of information processing. The evaluator is prompted to come up with a *story* to explain how the new information coheres with the unified nature of the object (O’Laughlin & Malle 2002). Moreover, the possibility that individuals are treated as exceptions to the rule works in favor of the individual being evaluated, by allowing the evaluator to digest expectation-inconsistent messages without forfeiting their partisan predisposition. This provides the rationale of the following hypothesis:

*H1: Evaluations of out-group candidates are more responsive to positive information than Evaluations of out-group parties.*

A similar dynamic is expected in evaluations of in-group targets, but in this case negative information is expected to impact candidate evaluations more than party evaluations. Just as the abstract and collective nature of parties facilitates a disconfirmation of unexpected positive information about out-group targets, negative information about an in-group party may be

attributed to a *few bad apples* in a process known as the “black sheep” effect (Lewis & Sherman 2007). This same strategy can be used to explain negative information directed at an individual co-partisan, allowing the evaluator to form a negative evaluation without challenging their partisan predispositions. Accordingly:

*H2: Evaluations of in-group candidates are more responsive to negative information than evaluations of out-group parties.*

The information processing strategies associated with entitativity explains attitudinal responses to information which runs counter to previous beliefs. When confronted with information which confirms these, it is therefore unlikely that there will be substantial differences in party and candidate evaluations.

### *3.1.2 Gender and partisan predispositions*

The process of personalization makes the characteristics of individual candidates more important. One characteristic that has been shown to have effects on candidate evaluations is gender (Smith *et al*, 2007). A claim which has received some support holds that women are subject to a “backlash effect”; although they are rewarded with higher evaluations than men when subject to positive information, they are also punished more severely for transgressions (Rudman & Phelan 2008). In addition to the hypotheses presented above, this experiment will explore (1) whether there is a noticeable backlash effect in candidate evaluations in Norway and (2) whether it depends on *in* and *out*-group attitudes.

### *3.1.3 The case of Norway*

The experiment portrays attitude formation during the run-up to a municipal election in Norway. Several considerations makes Norway a compelling case. First, the Norwegian political system promotes a perception of parties as highly entitative organizations, meaning Norway can be thought of as a *least likely case*. Norway has a multi-party system based on proportional representation and a stable party system. It is often said that systems based on proportional representation structures incentives in a way that promotes centrally organized and disciplined parties. This is true of Norway, where party organizations permeate the political process from beginning to end. Parties dominate the nomination of candidates, which is organized by the

constituency branches of the party organization (Valen et al. 2002). During election campaigns, candidates adhere to centralized party strategies (Karlsen & Skogerbø: 2015), and as elected officials they remain largely subservient to the party line (Sieberer 2006; Rasch ). Moreover, since candidates are elected through party lists, they are not incentivized to promote themselves individually or compete with party colleagues for the attention of voters (Karlsen & Skogerbø 2015). Laver and Schofield's (1990: 237) observation that Norwegian parties "function more as unitary actors than do those in most of the other West European systems" remains a fair description of the Norwegian party system to this day. In line with previous research which shows that unity of purpose increases the perceived entitativity of groups, it is therefore likely that Norwegian parties are viewed as high-entitativity organizations. In accordance with the theory, Norwegian citizens should therefore be fairly sensitive to new information about them, at least in comparison with party systems associated with higher degrees of intra-party pluralism. As such, Norway is a hard case for the theory, making results consistent with the hypotheses all the more compelling.

The second reason Norway is a compelling case is its normalcy. Although the characteristics of Norwegian parliamentarism makes Norway a "least likely" case, it is not alone in this category. The characteristics just described are fairly unremarkable for parliamentary systems based on proportional representation. Cohesive parties are generally understood to be a consequence of such systems (Sieberer 2006). For the purpose of testing the theory, we can therefore think of Norway as a representative case.

The third reason Norway is a compelling case has to do with the experimental design. For reasons to be explained below, the experiment portrays a process of attitude formation during a municipal election campaign. Although there are good reasons to be suspicious of attempts to attribute regularities observed at the local level to national politics, this may be done with some credibility in the Norwegian case. Norway is divided into 11 administrative counties which make up the constituencies for parliamentary and county elections. These counties are in turn divided into 356 municipalities, which serve as administrative units and as constituencies for local elections. National and local level elections are held interchangeably every two years. Although unique local parties exist, the national parties are dominant at the municipal level. Moreover, "the composition and conflict structure of the municipality council is quite equal to the

composition of the parliament” (Enli & Skogerbø 2013: 761). During campaigns, local branches of national parties adhere to centralized campaign strategies, and front their own local issues within its confines (Karlsen and Skogerbø, forthcoming). Although local candidates often stress the importance of “localizing” campaigns, this typically means “‘translating’ the national campaign strategy to the regional or local level, not about independent local strategies” (Karlsen & Skogerbø 2015: 428). Accordingly, respondents are likely to identify the local branches of the parties closely with their national organizations, and evaluate them similarly.

### 3.2 Research design

The hypotheses are tested in a survey experiment conducted through a probability-based online survey. The experiment portrays the process of attitude formation about parties and candidates during a campaign leading up to a municipal election in Norway. In this section, explain the advantage of the experimental method, before presenting the experimental design used in this study.

#### *3.2.1 Experimental method*

Attitude formation is a complex psychological phenomenon and is difficult to observe empirically. This has not deterred political scientists from producing a substantial literature on the subject. Until recently, this literature consisted mostly of observational studies (Holbrook 2011). Such designs suffer from well known limitations when it comes to establishing causal effects. This is particularly true of cross-sectional designs which are unable to establish the direction of causality between the attitude of interest and the explanatory variable. This problem can be somewhat alleviated using panel surveys (and to a lesser extent repeated surveys) which allow the researcher to narrow the cause of attitude change to events occurring between two attitude readings. However, even then the cause of the attitude change cannot be precisely identified. Dynamic real-world information environments are complex, and any given attitude is influenced by several factors at once. Moreover, attitude formation involves difficult-to-measure discrepancies such as framing effects. To fully address these problems, an experimental design is necessary. It allows the researcher to control the information environment, and manipulate only the treatment of theoretical interest. In the present case, that means holding the flow of

information constant, and manipulating only whether the target of that information is a party or an individual politician, and the target's partisan affiliation *vis-à-vis* that of the respondent.

Another significant advantage of the experimental method in relation to observational studies is that it allows us to overcome what is sometimes referred to as *the fundamental problem of causal inference*; “we cannot simultaneously observe a person or entity in its treated and untreated states” (Holland 1986). This is particularly precarious when the subjects are self-aware and non-identical, such as in the present case. Whilst in the natural sciences it is often possible to expose the same entity (or at least functionally equivalent ones) to different treatments, human beings are stubbornly distinctive. Accordingly, distinguishing between effects particular to the phenomenon of interest and effects particular to the observed individuals is less than straightforward. Although within-subject designs allow us to observe the same individuals after exposure to different treatments, the possibility that effects of earlier treatments influence subsequent ones means that such observations cannot be treated as independent. This is particularly relevant to studies of clearly cumulative phenomena like attitude formation. The experimental method overcomes this problem through random administration of treatments. By ensuring that each subject has an equal chance to be in a particular treatment condition, individual differences in the sample is controlled for. In other words, when respondents are randomly assigned to treatment groups, these groups can be treated as identical (Druckman *et al.* 2011).

For the present purpose, the survey experiment is a particularly suitable implementation of the experimental method. A survey experiment is “a deliberate manipulation of the form or placement of items in a survey instrument, for purposes of inferring how public opinion works in the real world.” (Gaines *et al.* 2007: 3). Compared to laboratory experiments, survey experiments are both time and cost-effective to implement, and can be administered to a large number of subjects. More importantly, while laboratory experiments for practical purposes tend to rely on non-representative subject pools, the format of a survey experiment is easily administered using random sampling techniques that ensure a representative sample. To sum up – random assignment of treatment gives survey experiments an internal-validity edge over observational

studies, and random sampling of subjects gives them an external validity edge over laboratory experiments.

### *3.2.2 Priming and perceived entitativity*

Although it is a great advantage of the experimental method that it allows the researcher to manipulate the flow of information, there are also difficulties associated with this. In creating an artificial information environment, the experimenter runs the risk of unintentionally influencing participants through so-called “priming” effects. Of particular relevance here is the possibility that the presentation of information about an attitude object may influence its perceived entitativity.

This conceptual issue is anticipated by the theory. An individual politician may uncontroversially be described as being and doing any number of things, but describing a party in the same terms gives the impression that it is a concrete and purposive entity when it might just as well be described in terms that emphasize its internal disunity. What is important is of course that information about the party in the experiment is presented as it would have been in a dynamic real-world setting. With this in mind, the experiment employs two different conceptualizations of political parties. The first is in line with the conceptualization of groups most frequently used in the entitativity literature, which views groups simply as collections of individuals. Accordingly, group traits and behaviors are presented as traits and behaviors belonging to different group members. Thus, Hamilton and Sherman (1996: 340) recommend the following design:

The obvious strategy for this kind of work is quite simple. It involves presenting the identical information (e.g. a series of behavior descriptive sentences) to two groups of participants. One group is told that all of the information describes the same person; the other group is told that each information describes a different person but that all those persons are members of the same group. A comparison of these two conditions then permits an analysis of the effects of the target of perception - individual or group - on the dependent variable of interest in a particular study.



Forming an attitude towards a group is here understood as a process which involves attributing the individual traits and behaviors of group members to the group as a whole. Since the personalization literature emphasizes the collective/individual dichotomy, I make use of a similar approach here by estimating how attitudes towards a political party are affected by exposure to information about affiliated politicians.

The second conceptualization describes parties as purposive agents capable of doing and being things in the direct sense employed in descriptions of individual persons. As an analytical claim this might be dubious, but that is less important than the fact that it reflects how parties are frequently described in everyday speech and in the media. If such descriptions prime individuals to perceive parties as highly entitative, and for the purpose of attitude formation treat them the same way they treat individuals, then that is of theoretical interest in its own right. If, on the other hand, there are differences between attitudes directed at parties and individual politicians even when parties are framed as highly entitative, it is clear that individuals process information about parties and politicians differently irrespective of how that information is presented. Since the flow of information about parties in real world contexts takes many forms, accounting for both conceptualizations of parties is necessary to ensure external validity. At the same time, it provides the opportunity to explore whether framing impacts on attitudes towards parties. If this is so, the patterns projected by the hypotheses are expected to be more pronounced when parties are described as collective entities than when they are described as purposive agents. That is, respondents in the collective party condition will be less receptive to new information than those assigned to the purposive party condition.

### *3.2.3 The Norwegian Citizen Panel*

The experiment was conducted as part of the 18th wave of the Norwegian Citizen Panel (NCP). The NCP is a platform for internet-based surveys of public opinion on a range of social and political issues in Norway administered by the Digital Social Science Core Facility (DIGSSCORE) at the University of Bergen. The questionnaire was completed by a total of 1220 respondents between June 2<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> 2020. The invitation to take part in the survey was distributed via email. The participants were selected by random sampling of the Norwegian tax registry, and is a representative sample of the Norwegian citizenry. The only conditions for

participation was that respondents had to be 18 or above, and be permanent residents of Norway. The NCP methodology report (Skjervheim *et al.* 2019) can be consulted for further information on sampling procedures and methodology.<sup>3</sup> Due to time constraints, the data used in the analysis has not been through DIGSSCORE's quality controls.

#### *3.2.4 Experimental design*

The experiment was designed to portray attitude formation during a political campaign. Respondents were asked to imagine an upcoming election in their municipality. They were exposed to two vignettes presented as summaries of local news coverage about a party or a politician, each of which were followed by an opinion reading in which the respondents indicated their overall impression of the target. The first vignette contained three snippets of information about the target, all of which were devised to produce an unambiguously positive impression. The second vignette contained unambiguously negative information meant to directly contradict aspects of the information contained in the initial vignette.

The name of the party or party affiliation of the candidate was determined by the respondent's own party identification. This was established in two pre-experiment questions in which respondents indicated which party they felt "closest to" and which party they felt "most distant from". For each party and candidate condition, half the respondents were assigned the party they felt closest to, and the other half were assigned the party they felt most distant from.

This simple design allows us to probe attitudinal responses to information about parties and candidates under different conditions of partisan alignment. One quarter of the respondents were assigned to the male candidate treatment, and another quarter to the female candidate treatment. In the vignettes, the candidate was described as a given party's "top candidate". The two conceptualizations of parties described above were treated as two separate treatments, and assigned one quarter of the respondents each. In the purposive party treatment, "the top candidate" was simply replaced with "the party". In the collective party treatment, the information was presented as pertaining to a party's "top three candidates", and the three information snippets in the initial vignette were attributed to each of them separately. After

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<sup>3</sup> I reference an earlier methodology report because the data from wave 18 are not yet publicly available.

reading these, the respondents were asked to indicate their impression of the party as a whole. The expectation-inconsistent behavior described in the second vignette was attributed to “one of the candidates,” and respondents were again asked to evaluate the party as a whole. The purpose was to estimate the extent to which respondents attribute information about a politician to the group as a whole.

Table 3.1 displays the resulting division of treatment-groups.

**Table 3.1 - Treatment groups**

Politician				Party			
Male		Female		Party (purposive)		Top three candidates	
In-group	Out-group	In-group	Out-group	In-group	Out-group	In-group	Out-group
n = 163	n = 159	n = 149	n = 156	n = 152	n = 138	n = 148	n = 155
n = 1220							

*Table 1*

Several considerations went into the formulation of the vignettes. It was crucial that the information snippets were of a type that could reasonably be applied to both parties and individual candidates. Moreover, they had to be specific enough to ensure that respondents could form fairly informed impressions, and so that variations in evaluations were not too influenced by respondent-specific interpretations. Finally, the information had to be reasonably applicable to all the major political parties in Norway, meaning most substantive policy issues had to be avoided. A proposal to improve the municipalities roads and parks was deemed sufficiently bipartisan, and provides a set-up for the negative information presented subsequently. With this in mind, the initial part of the experiment was conducted with the following vignette (translated from Norwegian - see appendix for original):

*Imagine that there is an upcoming election in your municipality. During the campaign, the local newspaper writes the following about the [in or out-group party]’s [top candidate/top candidate/local party/three primary candidates]:*

- *[He/She/The party/The first] has prepared a good plan to improve the municipality's roads and parks.*
- *[He/She/The Party/The second] demonstrates a sincere commitment to the inhabitants of the municipality.*
- *[He/She/The Party/The third] is trusted by the voters, according to the newspaper's polling.*

*Based on the information above, what is your impression of the [candidate/party]?*

It was expected that out-group respondents, whose partisan predisposition was challenged by the positive information, would evaluate candidates more positively than the parties. In-group respondents, whose predispositions were confirmed by the positive information, were expected to have fairly similar evaluations of all the attitude objects, as the cognitive processes involved in coping with expectation-inconsistent information would not be engaged.

The second vignette was designed to contradict the first one. After providing the first evaluation, the respondents were presented with the following vignette:

*The week before the election, the local newspaper prints a new piece about the [candidate/party/one of the candidates]. A leak of internal correspondence reveals that [he/she/the party/they<sup>4</sup>] do(es) not have plans to fulfill the promise of improving the municipality's roads and parks.*

*In light of this new information, what is your impression of the [candidate/party/party]?*

The breaking of an election promise was intended as a negative cue, compounded by the fact that plans were concealed from the public. Moreover, the information directly conflicts with the earlier descriptions of the attitude object as demonstrating a sincere commitment to the

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<sup>4</sup> "They" here means the non-gendered Norwegian singular "vedkommende".

inhabitants of the municipality who, the respondents were told, have high trust towards it. In addition to being negative, this information was intended to shed new light on the information contained in the initial vignette. The degree of attitude change could then give an indication of how far the respondents integrate new information with prior beliefs. It was expected that in-group respondents, now presented with negative information about a co-partisan object, would evaluate the candidate more negatively than the party. At the same time, out-group respondents would have their partisan predispositions confirmed, and downgrade all evaluations to a similarly low level.

### *3.2.5 Variables*

The dependent variables are the evaluations of attitude objects recorded after exposure to the vignettes. These were measured on a continuous 11-point scale ranging from 0 (do not like at all) to 10 (like a great deal). General evaluative terms like these measured on a continuous scale have the advantage that they facilitate comparison of attitudes directed at different attitude objects.

The party identity (PID) variable was based on two pre-survey questions. Respondents were asked the following questions: “Which party do you feel the closest to?” and “which party do you feel the most distant from?” Without relying on complex multi-item measures which in the present case would be impractical, closeness to party is an appropriate measure of party identification understood as group belonging rather than an evaluative attitude (Greene 2002: 184).

The attitude object is as described above. The variable *Time* distinguishes between the two opinion readings.

## **3.3 Analysis**

The data is analyzed in two steps. First, they are analyzed using a 4x2x2 design with two between subject factors (attitude object and partisan party identification) and one within subject factor (time). For a more intuitive examination of the within-subject change in evaluations

between the attitude readings, I then analyze the change in evaluations as a 4x2 (attitude object and party identification).

### 3.3.1 Results

Table 2 reports the mean values of party and candidate evaluations recorded after respondents were exposed to each of the vignettes.

**Table 3.2 - Mean party and leader evaluations by treatment**

<i>Mean evaluations after exposure to positive information</i>	In-group	Out-group
Female candidate	8.43 (148, 0.146)	5.59 (155, 0.203)
Male candidate	8.13 (162, 0.155)	5.73 (159, 0.180)
Party(collective)	8.29 (147, 0.144)	4.78 (154, 0.208)
Party(purposive)	8.27 (154, 0.170)	4.90 (138, 0.211)
<hr/>		
<i>Mean evaluations after exposure to negative information</i>		
Female candidate	4.09 (148, 0.178)	2.26 (156, 0.123)
Male candidate	4.02 (161, 0.159)	2.72 (159, 0.143)
Party(collective)	5.12 (146, 0.198)	2.46 (155, 0.138)
Party(purposive)	5.04 (152, 0.205)	2.52 (138, 0.140)

Party and leader evaluations by partisan alignment. Cells show mean scores on a unipolar scale where respondents rate the likeability of the target, from 0 = 'Not at all likeable' to 10 'Very likeable'. Number of respondents and standard errors, respectively, are shown in the parentheses.

*Table 2*

The above panel displays evaluations recorded after exposure to the initial positive vignette. Consistent with expectations, respondents assigned to the in-group treatment made little distinction between the different attitude objects. Those assigned to the out-group treatment, however, evaluated the candidates considerably more positively than the parties. Accordingly, respondents were more responsive to information which challenges their partisan predispositions when evaluating candidates than parties.

In group condition female candidates were evaluated moderately more positively than male candidates (an average of 0.30 points on the evaluation scale). In the outgroup condition this relation was reversed, and the difference more moderate. The two party treatments, however, were almost identical.

The lower panel displays the mean values of evaluations recorded after exposure to the second, negative vignette. In line with the expectations, the effects are now reversed. Those assigned to the in-group treatment, now exposed to negative information about a co-partisan target, recorded considerably more negative attitudes towards the candidate than the party. Those assigned to the out-group condition, however, converged on similarly negative attitudes towards each attitude object. Accordingly, respondents were again more responsive to information which is incongruent with their partisan priors when evaluating candidates than parties. Once again, there were minimal differences within the party and candidate groups. In the ingroup condition, the female candidate was again evaluated more positively, but the gap between the male and female candidate was narrower. In the outgroup, the male candidate was as in the initial observation evaluated more positively than the female candidate, and the gap between them had widened considerably (0.32 points). Again there were minimal differences between the two party conditions. These results are clearly visible in figure 3.1.

The descriptive statistics appear to support hypotheses 1 and 2, but the gender effects are less clear. To examine whether the apparent differences are significant, I run a three-way mixed ANOVA to account for the dependence of the two evaluations. The results are reported in table 3.3.

**Table 3.3 - Three-way ANOVA**

Source	df	F-value	<i>P</i>
Object	3	0.88	0.446
PID	1	885.75	0.000
Time	1	1443.51	0.000
Object*PID	3	11.30	0.000
Object*Time	3	9.96	0.000
PID*Time	1	31.32	0.000
Object*PID*Time	3	0.12	0.944
Error	2414		

4x2x2 ANOVA with two between subject factors (attitude object and partisan affiliation) and one within subject factor (the first and second evaluation).

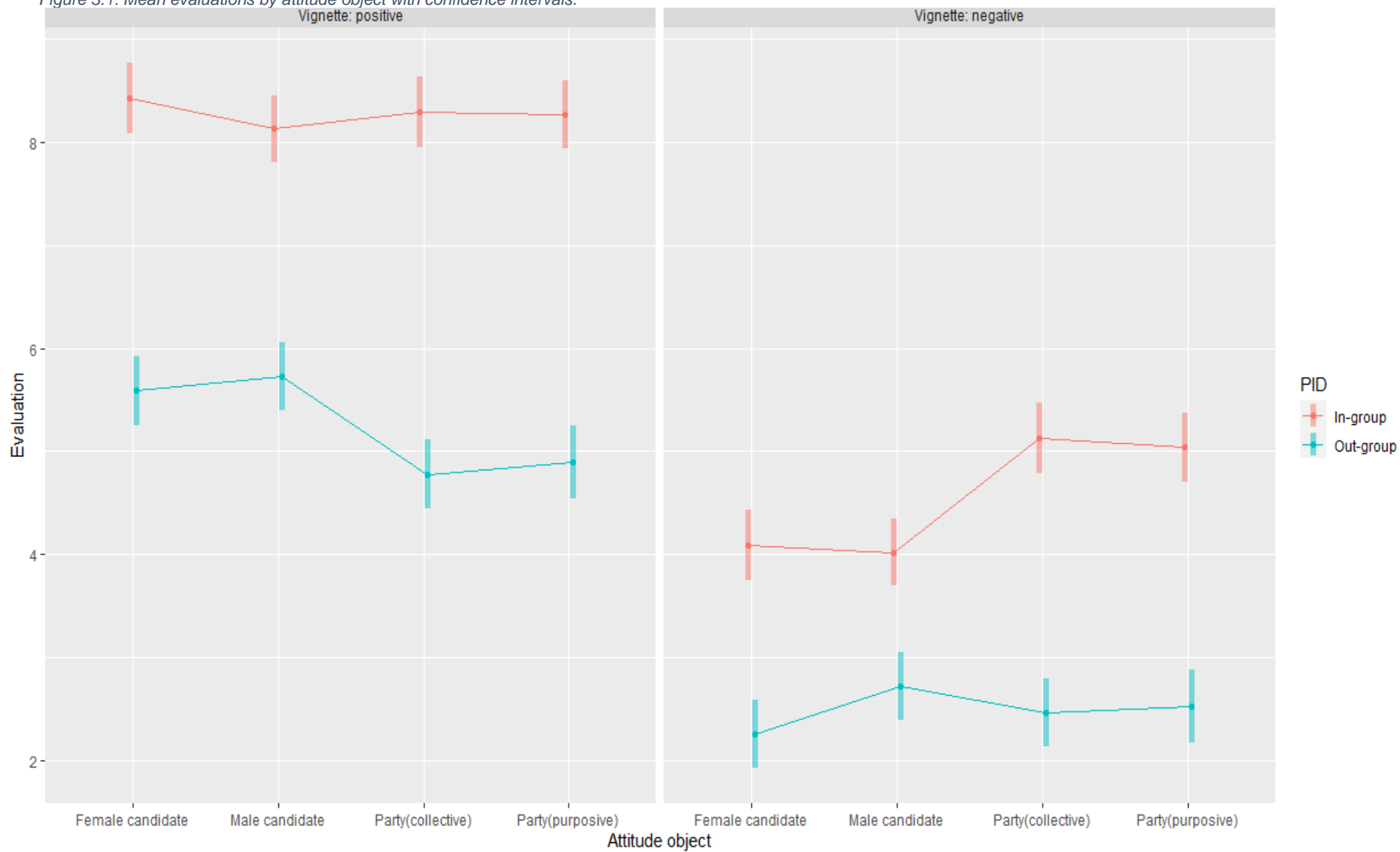
*Table 3*

All the effects apart from the three-way interaction are significant at a 0.05 significance level.

The significance of the two-way interaction between party identification and attitude object confirms that respondents' evaluations of the different attitude objects are significantly different within the *in* and *out*-groups. The analysis so far strongly suggests that this is due to differences in candidate and party evaluations among respondents who were exposed to information which challenged their partisan predispositions. A Tukey test (reported in appendix table 1) confirms this. Amongst the attitudes formed after exposure to the initial vignette, only the party and candidate treatments in the out-group condition are significantly different. Amongst attitudes formed after exposure to the second vignette, only differences between the party and candidate treatments in the in-group condition are significant.



Figure 3.1: Mean evaluations by attitude object with confidence intervals.



The non-significance of the three-way interaction is surprising and warrants further investigation. It suggests that the interaction between party identification and attitude object did not vary between the two evaluations recorded. A more straightforward way to approach the within-subject effect is to examine how attitudes between the initial and the second evaluation. Table 3.4 reports the mean change in evaluations between the two opinion readings.

**Table 3.4 - Mean change in party and leader evaluations by treatment**

<i>Mean change in evaluations between opinion readings</i>	In-group	Out-group
Female candidate	-4.34 (148, 0.228)	-3.32 (155, 0.209)
Male candidate	-4.14 (160, 0.210)	-3.01 (159, 0.225)
Party(collective)	-3.16 (146, 0.204)	-2.31 (146, 0.218)
Party(purposive)	-3.23 (152, 0.221)	-2.38 (138, 0.224)

Change in party and leader evaluations by partisan alignment. Cells show the difference between the mean evaluations recorded after exposure to the positive vignette, and the mean evaluations recorded after exposure to the negative vignette. The evaluations were recorded on a unipolar scale where respondents rate the likeability of the target, from 0 = 'Not at all likeable' to 10 'Very likeable'. Number of respondents and standard errors, respectively, are shown in the parentheses.

*Table 4*

To begin with, it should be noted that the greater evaluative change recorded amongst *in*-group respondents is likely due to their more positive initial evaluations, meaning they had further to fall when exposed to the negative information. More interesting than the magnitude of the fall is the fact that the difference between change in party and candidate evaluation was approximately the same in the *in* and *out*-groups conditions. That is, both groups punished the candidate more harshly than the party, and did so by about the same amount. This is clearly evident in figure 2.

Figure 3.2: Mean change in evaluation by attitude object with confidence intervals.

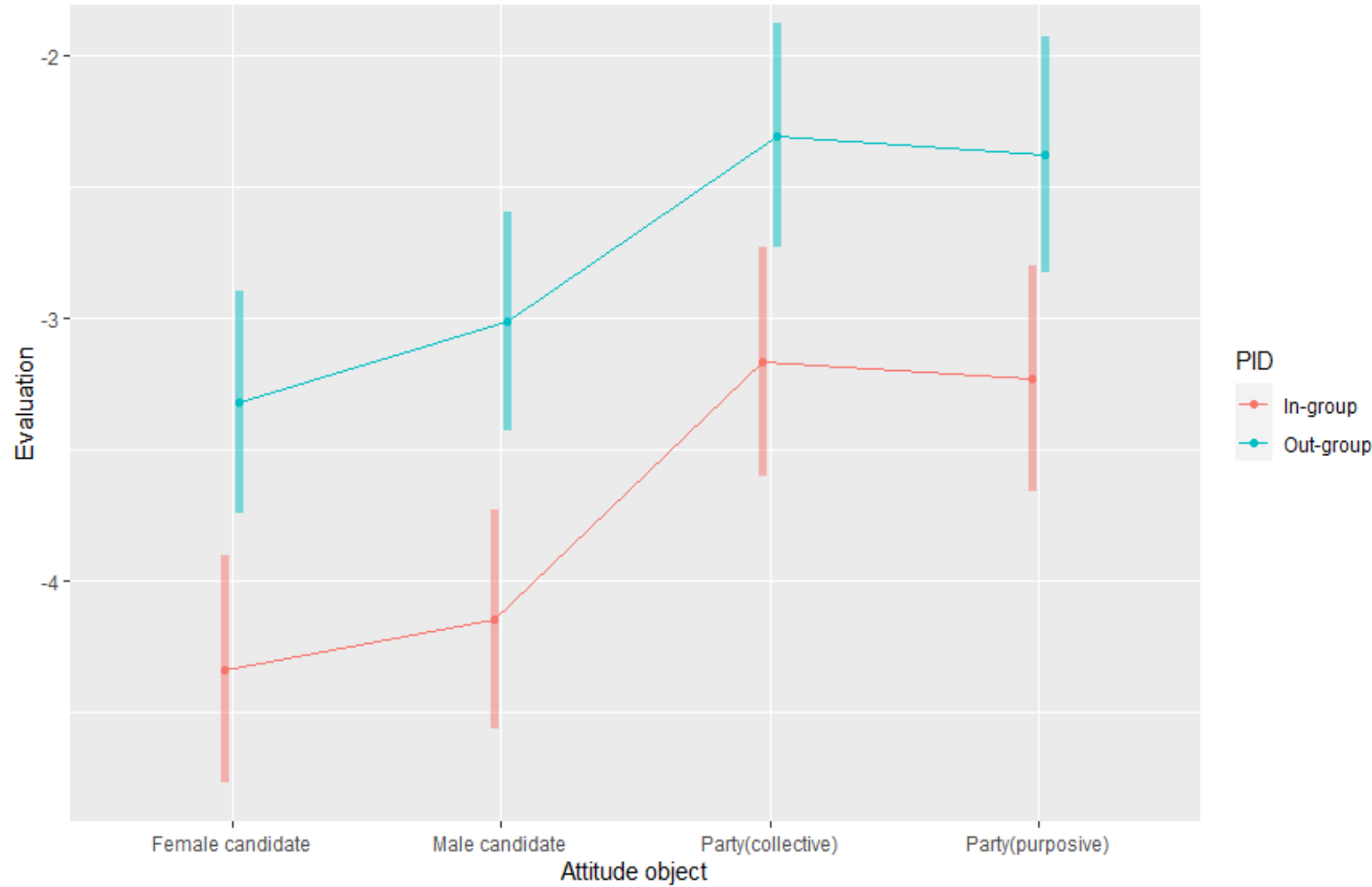


Figure 2

The diagram clearly shows that parties and candidates were evaluated differently, and that the difference is almost perfectly parallel for the *in* and *out*-group conditions. This is reflected in the non-significant interaction between party identity and attitude objects reported in table 4.4 (two-way ANOVA of change in evaluation). However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the processes that distinguish party and candidate evaluations are not moderated by partisan motivated reasoning. This is because the initial evaluation from which the evaluative change was

calculated already contained bias. It appears that this was almost perfectly offset by the bias of the second evaluation.

**Table 3.5 – Two-way ANOVA: change in evaluation**

Source	df	F-value	<i>P</i>
Object	3	12.46	0.00
PID	1	39.56	0.00
Object*PID	3	0.19	0.902
Error	2414		

Two-way ANOVA

*Table 5*

In the initial evaluation, respondents in the in-group condition whose partisan predispositions were confirmed by the positive vignette evaluated all attitude objects at the same, positive level, while the out-group respondents evaluated the candidate more positively than the party. In the second evaluation, this dynamic was reversed, and almost perfectly so. Out-group respondents whose partisan predispositions were affirmed evaluated all attitude objects at the same, negative level. In-group respondents, meanwhile, punished the candidate more than the party, at a magnitude almost identical to out-group respondents' initial favoring of candidates over parties. Interestingly, the effect of *in* and *out*-group bias appears to have reverse-identical effects on party and candidate evaluations.

Another noteworthy observation is that both *in* and *out*-group partisans appear to have punished female candidates more than male candidates for the transgression described in the second vignette. This provides partial support of the backlash effect without moderation effect.

However, a Tukey test (reported in Appendix table 2) shows that the difference is not statistically significant. As above, only the pairs of candidate and party conditions are significantly different.

### *3.3.2 Discussion*

The experiment explored whether party and candidate evaluations respond differently to information effects, and whether this dynamic is mediated by partisan motivated reasoning. In so doing, I have empirically tested a claim often made in the personalization literature; that candidates have an advantage over collective entities like parties in reaching across partisan divides and appealing to new voters. The theory suggested that the abstract and collective nature of parties facilitates a biased (dis)confirmation of information which conflicts with partisan predispositions. In contrast, the expectation of internal unity of individual persons facilitates an integrative style of information processing. This was the basis of hypothesis of 1 and 2, both of which were strongly supported by the results.

Respondents evaluating candidates displayed lower bias when confronted with information which challenges partisan predispositions. The same type of information produces systematically different attitudinal responses depending on whether the attitude object was a party or an individual candidate. This is in accordance with the personalization literature, which suggests that person-centered politics is a viable means to reach across partisan divides. However, there is a risk involved; just as out-group partisans reward individual candidates more than parties, in-group partisans also punish them more for transgressions.

Surprisingly, the respondents assigned to the purposive and collective party conditions recorded almost identical evaluations of the target. In the collective condition, the information contained in the initial positive vignette was presented as describing three different candidates belonging to the party. The transgression described in the second vignette, was committed by only one of them, meaning responses involved generalizing the behavior of one group member to the group as a whole.

The analysis revealed no significant backlash effect in the evaluations of female candidates. This is contrary to previous research, and may possibly be explained by the Norwegian context.

Moreover it should be noted that does not rule out forms of discriminations not captured simply like/dislike attitudes measured in this experiment.

### 3.3.3 Limitations

The analysis gives cause for optimism about the theory. However, certain limitations of the research design should be addressed in future studies. First, it is possible that the anonymity of the candidates described in the experiment facilitated more extreme responses to the treatment material. Since the candidates were anonymous, the respondents had no prior knowledge about them apart from what was derived from their party affiliation. The information contained in the vignettes was therefore all they knew about the candidates, and this might have elicited particularly extreme evaluations. In contrast, respondents evaluating parties may have had the local chapter of their own *in* or *out*-group party in mind as they completed the survey. In that case, prior knowledge may have moderated the effect of new information. This should be addressed in future research by embedding the experiment more fully in a realistic context, using real candidates.

While the extremity or moderation of evaluative responses to new information is indicative of the information processing strategy used, the experiment could have benefited from the inclusion of post-treatment questions to further narrow down the cognitive processes used by the respondents. Future research should include variables commonly used to distinguish between online and memory-based information processing such as response latencies, measures of recall, attitude strength and the certainty of the evaluations (McGraw 2011)

## **Party and leader evaluations during the 2017 German federal election: Information effects in a dynamic political environment**

The previous chapter used a survey experiment to explore whether citizens evaluate parties and candidates differently. By keeping the flow of information constant, and manipulating the target of that information, it was established that citizens respond differently to the same kind of stimuli when evaluating parties and candidates. However, politics is not conducted in a laboratory setting. This chapter explores party and candidate evaluations in a dynamic information environment. Rather than exploring the effects of specific pieces of information, which now is unknown, it examines the *overall* effects of information on party and leader evaluations. I make use of survey panel data from the campaign leading up to the 2017 German federal election to explore how voters updated their attitudes towards parties and leaders in response to new information. Using a Bayesian learning model, I estimate and compare the relative effects of prior beliefs and new information on party and leader evaluations, and the effect of partisan bias on information processing.

First, I present the hypotheses and case selection. I then explain the rationale of the Bayesian learning model, and its relevance for this study. The data, variables and statistical model are then presented, and the analysis conducted. Contrary to expectations, respondents surveyed in the time leading up to the 2017 German federal election displayed remarkably similar updating behavior across the two types of attitude objects. However, in accordance with the theory, candidate evaluations were less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

## 4.1 Hypotheses and case selection

This chapter shifts focus from direct to *overall* information effects. That is, it examines the use of information in party and leader evaluations, whilst remaining agnostic about the quality and quantity of that information. The purpose is to explore whether patterns consistent with the theoretical framework presented in chapter two are observable in the overall effects of information on party and leader evaluations. In this section, I present the hypotheses and the German case.

### 4.1.1 Hypotheses

Accounting for the effect of information processing on political attitudes poses a significant challenge. It involves looking beyond the direct effects of political phenomena, to estimate how individuals respond to the flow of information about them. For this reason, most studies on the topic use experimental designs which give the researcher full control of the flow of information. The benefits of the experimental method were exploited in the previous chapter. Here, I address the well known concern that direct observation of micro-processes in laboratory settings cannot be assumed to provide valid estimates of how the same processes play out in a dynamic real world setting. In politics, how citizens respond to individual pieces of information is typically less consequential than the overall effect of the near unlimited quantities of information that they are exposed to on a day to day basis. Accordingly, this chapter shifts focus from *specific* to *overall* information effects. That is to say, it examines the use of information in party and leader evaluations, whilst remaining agnostic about the quality and quantity of that information. The broad aim of this chapter is to explore whether patterns consistent with the theoretical framework presented in chapter two are observable in the overall effects of information on party and leader evaluations.

Chapter two argued that citizens are flexible information processors who employ different strategies depending on the task at hand. These are usually thought of as falling along a continuum from online to memory-based information processing. In the former case, “evaluations are formed online, with continuous updating of the summary evaluation as new information is encountered” (McGraw 2011: 243). In the latter, “opinions are constructed at the



time an opinion is expressed by retrieving specific pieces of information from long-term memory and integrating that information to create a summary judgment” (McGraw 2011: 243). Despite widespread acceptance of this model, political scientists rarely examine which structural conditions determine the information processing strategy used (McGraw 2011). The central proposition of this thesis is that different information processing strategies are used in party and candidate evaluations.

As shown in chapter two, research clearly indicates that candidate evaluations are largely formed online, meaning they are relatively responsive to new information. The role of information processing in party evaluations is less clear, but citizens appear to have fairly stable relationships with parties, relying to a greater extent on beliefs stored in long term memory. Accordingly it is expected that party evaluations are more reliant on prior beliefs and leader evaluations are more responsive to new information. This forms the first hypothesis:

*H1: Party evaluations are more reliant on prior beliefs and leader evaluations are more responsive to new information.*

It was further proposed that the dynamic which differentiates party and leader evaluations interacts with partisan motivated reasoning. The retrospective mode of attitude formation associated with party evaluations is amplified by the effect of partisan predispositions. In effect, the abstract nature of the party facilitates a dissociation of unexpected information, as well as a partisan interpretation of new information. This forms the basis of the second hypothesis:

*H2: Party evaluations are more susceptible to a biased interpretation of new information.*

#### *4.1.2 The case of Germany*

The unique characteristics of the German electoral system are the results of a concerted effort by the founders to curtail the instability of pure proportional systems, which they had experienced during the Weimar republic. The mixed-member proportional system was devised as a compromise between CDU/CSU, who favored a plurality system, and the parliamentary majority which did not (Klingemann & Wessels 2003: 280). It can be thought of as “a ‘middle way’ between pure proportional and majoritarian or plurality electoral systems” (Wagner & Weißels 2012: 74). Unremarkably for systems based on proportional representation, parties that pass the

5% threshold win seats proportional to their share of votes on what is known as *the second ballot*. However, voters may also cast an additional vote in single-seat districts which account for half the parliamentary seats. This so-called *first vote* is cast for a named candidate, who is elected by nominal plurality. This plurality element was expressly introduced by the founders with the express aim to incentivize personalized politics at the grassroots (Klingemann & Wesselss 2003). Although the *first vote* does not alter the power-share in the Bundestag (each direct mandate won via the *first vote replaces* one won via the *second vote*), it may influence voters' disposition towards parties and candidates. As Wagner and Weßels (2012: 74) note, "voters in Germany may be more used to care about candidates than voters in pure list systems because of the existence of a personal vote".

Another characteristic of the German political system which is often said to facilitate personalization is the broad power of the chancellery (Wagner and Weßels 2012: 3; Garzia 2011: 12). This is in line with McAllister's (2007) claim that greater executive authority manifested in an ability to shape policy is a sign of institutional personalization, and one of the causes of personalized voting behavior. As the only cabinet member elected by the Bundestag, the chancellor has the sole power to select and dismiss Federal ministers. Moreover, the chancellor formulates government policy, and has the power to establish, change and terminate federal ministries. Taken together, these two characteristics incentivize voters to familiarize themselves with, and take seriously, the individual politicians at the center of German politics. The term *kanzlerdemokratie* highlights the central position of the chancellor in German politics (Mommssen 2007).

Just as frequently, however, Germany is referred to as a *parteienstaat*, characterized by a stable party system. Stability has indeed been a central feature of the German political system which since its conception has been dominated by the two *volksparteien*, CDU/CSU and SPD. Until the Greens straddled the 5% threshold in 1983, the German party system could be characterized as a "two-and-a-half party system of a bipolar structure with the Free Democrats (Liberals) being the key actor to make or break governments" (Klingemann & Wesselss 1999: 7). With the Greens, it was instead a "two-and-two-halves" system. Throughout this period (1961-1994), the average change in votes from one election to another was just 2.6% and 2.5% for CDU/CSU and SPD respectively (Klingemann & Wesselss 1999: 3).

However, in Germany as elsewhere, a steady weakening of traditional social ties since the 70s is eroding the partisan identities underlying this stability. This is evident in the steady rise in the number of parliamentary parties and increased voter volatility (Arzheimer 2006). This seemingly came to a head in the 2017 federal election, where CDU/CSU and SPD jointly received just 53 per cent of the votes, their worst results to date. At the same time, the entrance of AFD and re-entrance of FDP to parliament marks the highest number of parliamentary parties yet.

## 4.2 Bayesian learning

The hypotheses are tested using a Bayesian learning model. Such models are often critiqued for taking an overly optimistic view of voter rationality. However, the usefulness of the Bayesian learning model is not restricted to its accuracy as a model of voter psychology. It may also be used as an “accounting device” to assess the relative impacts of prior beliefs and new information (Bartels 1993: 268). In this section, I explain the rationale of the Bayesian learning model and its relevance for this study.

### *4.2.1 Bayesian learning models*

Bayesian learning models derive from the Bayesian approach to statistical inference. Contrary to the frequentist tradition, which takes parameters to be fixed estimates of some underlying frequency, Bayesian statistics assumes that empirical phenomena are observed through uncertain parameters, represented as probability distributions. Bayesian inference is therefore a matter of weighing uncertain pieces of evidence against each other. Specifically, when faced with new information about some phenomenon, the Bayesian weighs the certainty of his prior beliefs (the weighted average of previously encountered information) against the certainty of the new evidence. Amongst its key characteristics, therefore, Bayesian inference is subjective – the impact of new information is conditional on the prior beliefs of the perceiver.

Bayesian learning models are based on the idea that in addition to being a useful mode of statistical inference, Bayesian inference approximates the real process whereby individuals update their beliefs in response to new information. As a model of political attitude formation, it has several compelling properties. In particular, it captures the uncertainty involved in navigating the political information environment. Political attitudes, and the precision of the evidence that informs them, are more realistically represented as oscillating around some unknown mean, than

as fixed estimates (Bullock 2009: 1110). Moreover, Bayes' theorem offers a parsimonious formalization of the intuitive notion that learning is a function of past experiences. Put simply, people "weigh new information through the lens of prior beliefs" (McAvoy 2015: 71). In the political science literature, Bayesian learning models have been used to formalize the role of prior beliefs within a rational choice framework. In the 1970s, "revisionists" proposed Bayesian priors as an explanation of the relative stability of partisan attitudes not grounded in social identity theory (Fiorina 1981). Crucially, Bayesian learning demonstrated how attitudes could be affected by one's experience of political events, whilst at the same time influencing how such experiences impact on attitude formation. Contrary to the Michigan models' conceptualization of party identification as largely unresponsive to political events, Bayesian learning suggests that attitude stability is a result of political experience. The paradigmatic example of this line of thought holds that political attitudes are based on a "running tally of retrospective evaluations of party promises and performance" (Fiorina 1981: 84). This retrospective model of attitude formation was formalized in the Bayesian framework by Achen (1992), and further elaborated by Gerber and Green (1998), who found that consistent with Bayesian learning, voters tend to stabilize their beliefs as they age and acquire political experience.

As explained in chapter two, the political attitude literature is framed by the debate between social identity and rational choice perspectives. In this context, the proposition that voters are unbiased information processors has been a particularly controversial premise of the Bayesian learning model. As greater attention has been devoted to the role of cognitive heuristics, moreover, Bayesian learning seems an increasingly unrealistic model of voters' psychology. While it can account for the relative effects of prior beliefs and new evidence, it cannot account for biases in the cognitive processes involved in the interpretation of that evidence (Bartels, 2002; Lodge & Taber: 2006). That is, it cannot account for motivated reasoning.

However, the utility of the Bayesian learning models is not limited to their ability to explain the true nature of voter psychology. As Bullock (2009: 1111) notes:

Bayesian models of public opinion can be heuristically useful even if we wrongly assume that people are Bayesians, because they offer a systematic way to account for the relative influences of old beliefs and new information.

The basic idea is that an assumption of Bayesian rationality allows us to represent attitudes and attitude change in terms of information effects. If we assume that attitude change is due to new information, examining the components of that change gives an insight into the use of new information. As Bartels (1993: 268) explains:

Bayes' rule may or may not be a realistic behavioral model; but it is certainly a useful accounting device—in particular because it provides a systematic way to characterize both the relative weight of old and new information in people's current opinions and the nature and sources of the new information they have absorbed between any two opinion readings.

Following Bartels, this chapter employs a Bayesian learning model to account for the relative effects of prior beliefs and new information in party and leader evaluations. This will allow us to test the hypotheses presented above. A closer review of the formal model will make this clear.

#### 4.2.2 *The formal model*

Borrowing Bartels' (2002: 121) notation, the process whereby individuals update their beliefs in response to new information can be expressed formally through Bayes' theorem. In the present case, this means thinking about the practice of evaluating a party or a leader as an attempt to work out one's *true* attitude towards the target – that is, one's feelings towards the party or leader in the ideal situation that all relevant information about them is known. Let  $\mu$  represent this true attitude.  $\mu_{it-1}$  is the mean of a normal distribution with variance  $1/\pi_{it-1}$  representing individual  $i$ 's estimation of  $\mu$  at time  $t - 1$ . The variance designates certainty of individual  $i$ 's prior belief.  $\mu_{it}$ , the posterior belief, is the updated evaluation provided after having been exposed to evidence  $x_{it}$ , represented as the mean of a normal distribution with variance  $\omega_{it}$ . Given this, the following two equations represent the Bayesian learning model:

$$\mu_{it} = \mu_{it-1} \pi_{it-1} / (\pi_{it-1} + \omega_{it}) + x_{it} \omega_{it} / (\pi_{it-1} + \omega_{it}) \quad (1)$$

$$\pi_{it} = \pi_{it-1} + \omega_{it} \quad (2)$$

where the posterior belief is a weighted average of the prior belief  $\mu_{it-1}$  and evidence  $x_{it}$ , each weighted by their variance. The explanation is intuitive. The more precise the prior attitude (the closer  $1/\pi_{it-1}$  is to 1), the higher its effect on posterior attitudes. Similarly,  $\omega_{it}$  close to 1 signifies that the evidence is precise, and will have considerable effect on the posterior attitude. The precision of the posterior attitude  $\pi_{it}$  is given by equation (2), and is the sum of the prior precision  $\pi_{it-1}$  and the precision of the evidence  $\omega_{it}$ .

In the framework of the Bayesian learning model, two different scenarios can account for the effect of prior beliefs and new information during attitude formation. The first is the strength of the prior attitude, represented in the model as its variance  $1/\pi_{it-1}$ . The second is the strength of the new evidence, again represented in the model as its variance  $\omega_{it}$ . The patterns projected by hypothesis 1 (that party evaluations are more reliant on prior beliefs than leader evaluations) can therefore be explained by two different dynamics.

The first is the attitude strength perspectives presented in chapter two which holds that attitudes towards parties are stronger than attitudes towards candidates. The other possibility, that information about parties is less certain than information about candidates is consistent with the theory of entitativity. In short, integrating new information into a summary judgement is more difficult when the target is perceived as having low entitativity; when the perceived entitativity of an object is low, it is less clear how the new information *fits in* with existing attitudes. Accordingly, new information is perceived as less certain. Although this distinction is of theoretical significance, it will not be accounted for in the analysis, which focuses on the relative impacts of prior beliefs and new information. Still, it should be emphasized that these two explanations are not mutually exclusive and may well complement each other.

As alluded to above, a third dynamic not accounted for by the rationale of Bayesian learning may influence the relative effects of prior beliefs and new information during attitude formation. Motivated reasoning refers to cases in which prior beliefs not only determine the impact of new information, but influence how that information is interpreted. That is, when “individuals are more willing to accept and evaluate positively information which is congruent with already existing priors” (Bargsted 2011: 9). Exactly what this violation of Bayesian learning looks like in empirical terms is a matter of debate. It is often claimed that unbiased bayesians should tend towards attitude convergence if given enough time and information (Bartels 2002). Against this, Gerber and Green argue that attitude divergence may persist without offending against Bayes’ rule when ideologically opposed individuals use different evaluative criteria (Gerber & Green, 1998). As Gerber and colleagues put it: “If, in a college dormitory, half the students like Mexican cuisine and the other half do not, we would not cite mixed reviews of the lunch menu when tacos are served as evidence of perceptual bias” (Gerber & Green 1999: 206). Since this chapter merely uses the Bayesian learning model as an “accounting device”, and does not aim to assess whether voters behave as good Bayesians, it will remain agnostic on the conceptual question about what constitutes a violation of Bayesian inference. The role of partisan information processing is implemented by estimating how much of the effect of new information is accounted for by party identification.

### 4.3 Variables and Measurement

The hypotheses are tested using data collected in the run-up to the 2017 German federal election. The availability of short-term campaign panel data is crucial for the analysis because it allows us to estimate the effect of prior evaluations. The Bayesian learning model is approximated using an autoregressive model, with the autoregressive parameter estimated as a random coefficient. In this section, I present the data, variables and statistical model.

#### 4.3.1 Data

To test the hypotheses, I use data from the Short-Term Campaign Panel data set collected by *GESIS - The Leibniz Social Science* (Roßteutscher *et al.* 2019). The panel followed 6778 respondents (the survivors from wave 1) for a period of little more than a year, culminating shortly after the election which was held on September 24. The campaign setting is ideal for

exploring the effects of prior beliefs and new information. Elections act as “collective learning experiences” in which voters’ attention is uncharacteristically attuned to political events, and they are more likely to be exposed to new information (Gelman & King, 1993; Lodge et al., 1995).

Although the panel is made up of 10 waves, I use only waves 2 to 8. The first wave is excluded since the model relies on previous waves for information on prior evaluations. The final two post-election waves are excluded to improve cross-wave comparability since the election results are likely to have strong effects on attitudes towards the leaders and parties. The analysis is therefore limited to 7 waves collected at regular intervals between February 16th and September 23<sup>rd</sup>, with the final wave collected immediately before the election on the September 24<sup>th</sup>. The relatively short intervals between each wave is a considerable benefit to the research design. We may assume that changes in party and leader evaluations are due to the stream of political information and not to changes in their underlying dispositions and ideological outlooks.

#### *4.3.2 Variables*

The dependent variables are based on evaluations of all five parties that had seats in the Bundestag prior to the election and their leaders, with the addition to the Alternative for Germany (AFD). The survey used similar wording and identical scales in the party and leader evaluation items. Respondents were asked “what do you think of the different parties in general?” and “please state what you think of some leading politicians”. The response was indicated on an 11-point scale ranging from -5 (I do not think much of the party/politician at all) to 5 (I think a great deal of the party/politician). The responses were coded on a scale from 1 (dislike) to 11 (like). The similarity of the language and scale used for the party and leader items bodes well for the comparability of the results. As noted in the previous chapter, the like/dislike scale is an appropriate variable for measuring dispositional attitudes across different attitude objects.

The main independent variable is party identification (PID). As in the previous chapter, this variable is measured as closeness to a political party. Respondents were asked to indicate which party if any they “lean towards”. Since voters in multi-party systems frequently have partisan



attachments to several parties at once, secondary party identification is also included using the same type of measurements (Mayer 2013). Respondents were also asked to indicate the strength of identification on a 5-point Likert scale, but this item was excluded from the analysis since measurements of attitude strength confounds party identity understood as *in/out* group membership with partisanship as an evaluative attitude (Greene 2002). Although the party identification items were included in each wave, I use only responses from the first wave included in the analysis in order to avoid the risk of simultaneous causation. Unfortunately, the survey did not include appropriate measures of *negative* (out-group) partisanship (Medeiros & Noel 2013). Consequently, the model will only estimate the effect of *in*-group attitudes.

I include a political knowledge index to control for the possibility that “more knowledgeable people tend to have more stable opinions that resist media influence.” (McGraw & Ling 2003: 25). This variable is based on a 16-question quiz about German politics. In addition to this, I include standard demographic control variables (gender, education and age).

#### 4.3.3 Statistical model

Following Bartels (1993; 2002), the rationale of the Bayesian learning model is approximated by regressing party and leader evaluations on evaluations given in the previous wave. This yields a simple autoregressive model:

$$Evaluation_{it} = \beta_0 Evaluation_{it-1} + \beta_1 Information_{it} \quad (3)$$

Where  $Evaluation_{it}$  and the lagged term  $Evaluation_{it-1}$  represents like/dislike evaluations of a particular party or party leader. In line with the Bayesian learning model presented in equation 1, these evaluations are assumed to be the respondents’ estimate of the mean value of the *true* evaluation  $\mu$  at time  $t$  and  $t_{t-1}$  respectively. Accordingly,  $\beta_0$  is an approximate measure of the precision  $1/\pi_{it-1}$  associated with the prior belief. It should have a value between 0 and 1, with higher values indicating strong priors. In line with the assumption that attitude change is the result of new information, the entirety of the effect not accounted for by the lagged dependent variable is the effect of new information. This is represented in the model by  $Information_{it}$ , which includes the effects of all other independent variables.

In the present case, we are interested in the effects of two variables. The first is the direct effect of prior beliefs on new information, represented by the lagged dependent variable. Second is the effect of party identification on information processing, understood as the effect of party identification on the interpretation of new information. Having controlled for the effect of the prior evaluation, any effect of party identification on attitude change is interpreted as partisan information processing. As Bartels (2002: 124) explains: “[i]f political learning is based on shared assessments of common political experience, there is no reason to expect the new information [...] to vary with respondents’ prior partisan loyalties.”

To approximate the formal model as closely as possible, the autoregressive parameter is estimated as a random coefficient. This allows for individual-level heterogeneity in the effect of prior attitudes, meaning heterogeneous prior influence is accounted for in the estimation of the other variables (Bargsted 2011: 15). The model assumes that the association between the lagged and posterior evaluation depends on the strength of the prior. Accordingly, it is crucial to ensure that the effects of partisanship accounts for variations in the effect of prior evaluations.

Put together, these considerations yield the following model:

$$Evaluation_{it} = \alpha + \beta_0 Evaluation_{it-1} + \beta_1 PID + Knowledge \varepsilon_{it} + \beta_{2-4} Demographics_{it}$$

(3)

## 4.4 Analysis

The model is first run separately on each party and leader to get an overview of how the coefficients behave in each case. Each party and leader pair is then included in the same model for systematic comparison of the observed effects. This is achieved by interacting the variables of interest with a dummy variable indicating whether the evaluation is targeted at a party or a leader. The analysis does not support hypothesis one, but finds strong support for hypothesis 2.

### 4.4.1 Results

In the first instance, the model is estimated separately for each party and leader. Because each party and leader pair are subject to different news coverage and employ different campaign

strategies, it makes sense to approach the analysis through pairwise comparisons. The results are reported in table 4.1*a* and *b*.

Looking first at the effect of the lagged dependent variable ( $Y_{it-1}$ ), we see that there appears to be little difference in the relative roles of prior evaluations and new information in party and leader evaluations. Surprisingly, leader evaluations were slightly more affected by the lagged dependent variable than party evaluations in the cases of CDU/Merkel, SPD/Schulz and Die Linke/Wagenknecht. In an immediate blow to hypothesis 1, the most stable evaluations were directed at a leader, Merkel, for whom an average of 79% of posterior evaluations were accounted for by the prior. This may in part be a result of her campaign strategy, which focused on stability and continuity. More importantly, she had by then been chancellor for three terms, and as familiar to German voters as can be, most of whom had probably made their minds up about her in advance. A similar point may be made in regards to Schulz, who entered the campaign with a strong personal image. When he took over as SPD leader early on in the survey period, his popularity benefited SPD's image, which quickly rose in the polls. This may explain the apparent volatility of SPD-evaluations, which were the least reliant on prior beliefs.

At any rate, the relative use of prior beliefs and new information in party and leader evaluations appears to be influenced by factors that are idiosyncratic to the campaign and the particular parties and leaders. That is, they are not subject to systematic differences between the party and leader categories. Amongst the party/leader pairs that fit with the expectation, party evaluations are only slightly more reliant on prior attitudes than leader evaluations. There are no indications of a systematic difference in party and leader evaluations, and so there appears to be no support for hypothesis one.

**Table 4.1a – Regression results for each party and candidate**

	CDU	Merkel	CSU	Seehofer	SPD	Schulz	AFD	Petry
Intercept	1.37*** (0.07)	1.17*** (0.08)	1.26*** (0.10)	1.88*** (0.06)	1.82*** (0.06)	1.40*** (0.07)	1.50*** (0.1)	1.74*** (0.1)
$Y_{it-1}$	0.71*** (0.01)	0.79*** (0.01)	0.77*** (0.01)	0.69*** (0.01)	0.62*** (0.01)	0.71*** (0.01)	0.68*** (0.02)	0.64*** (0.02)
PID	0.65*** (0.06)	0.45*** (0.05)	1.01*** (0.07)	0.76*** (0.05)	1.15*** (0.07)	0.80*** (0.06)	1.70*** (0.09)	1.46*** (0.07)
Knowledge	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.03*** (0.00)	-0.05*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.03*** (0.00)	-0.50*** (0.00)
Gender (male)	-0.17*** (0.02)	-0.17*** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.07** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)
Education	0.05*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)
Age	0.00* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)

Results of autoregressive model with random coefficient on the lagged dependent variable. Note: \* = significant at 5% \*\* significant at 1% \*\*\* significant at 0.1%. Values in parentheses are standard errors.

**Table 4.1b - Regression results for each party and candidate**

	FDP	Lindner	Die Linke	Wagenkecht	Grune	Görling-Eckardt
Intercept	1.63*** (0.07)	1.68*** (0.08)	1.51*** (0.09)	1.21*** (0.1)	1.53*** (0.1)	1.74*** (0.1)
$Y_{it-1}$	0.67*** (0.00)	0.69*** (0.00)	0.67*** (0.01)	0.72*** (0.01)	0.66*** (0.01)	0.61*** (0.01)
PID	1.85*** (0.12)	1.37*** (0.10)	1.70*** (0.1)	1.24*** (0.08)	1.19*** (0.08)	0.92*** (0.07)
Knowledge	0.00*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
Gender (male)	-0.11*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.04* (0.2)	-0.04*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)
Education	0.02*** (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Age	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)

Results of autoregressive model with random coefficient on the lagged dependent variable. Note: \* = significant at 5% \*\* significant at 1% \*\*\* significant at 0.1%. Values in parentheses are standard errors.

Moving on to the effect of party identification, things look more promising. Recall that this coefficient indicates the effect of party identification on the interpretation of new information. Having controlled for the effect of prior evaluations, any effects associated with party identification are those that bring about attitude change. In line with the assumption of Bayesian updating, we think of these as information effects. Even with the prior evaluation accounted for, there are significant and considerable effects of party identification across the board. This estimate, representing partisan bias, range from 1.85 for evaluations of FDP to 0.45 for Merkel.

Moreover, there appears to be a marked difference between party and leader evaluations, with the former category being considerably more influenced by partisan bias than the latter. Indeed, the effect of party identification is higher in party than leader evaluations across the board, and considerably so. It is particularly striking that this is the case even when the overall effect of new information is lower in party than leader evaluations.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, even when affected less by new information *overall*, party evaluations are affected more by partisan information processing than leader evaluations. In support of hypothesis 2, the effect of party identification on party evaluations appears to be considerably and systematically higher than its effect on leader evaluations.

#### *4.4.2 Testing for significance*

To explore whether the apparent differences in party and leader evaluations are statistically significant, a second set of models are estimated. These are broadly the same as above, but now each party and leader pair is included in the same model. Accordingly, the evaluation recorded on the dependent variable is directed at either a party or a party leader. A dummy variable is included to account for this. It is coded 1 if the evaluation is directed at a leader, and 0 if it is directed at a party. By interacting this variable with the lagged dependent variable and party identification, we can estimate whether the effects of these variables are significantly stronger in party or leader evaluations. Since the dummy variable is coded 1 for leader evaluations, a

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<sup>5</sup> That is, when the effect of the lagged dependent variable is higher in the party than the leader evaluation. This is the case in the following party and leader pairs: FDP/Lindner, Die Grune/ Göring- Eckardt, CSU/Seehofer and AFD/Petry.

positive coefficient on the interaction effect suggests that the variable under consideration has a stronger effect in leader than party evaluations. Conversely, a negative coefficient suggests that the effect on leader evaluations is weaker than the effect on party evaluations.

The results are displayed in table 4.2. Looking first at the interaction between the leader dummy and the lagged dependent variable, the initial observations are confirmed. There are significant differences in the use of prior beliefs in party and leader evaluations, but these are moderate, and idiosyncratic to the particular party and leader under evaluation. In accordance with the initial observations, the effect of the lagged dependent variable is greater in leader evaluations than party evaluations for CDU/Merkel, SPD/Schulz and Die Linke/Wagenknecht, but only moderately so. Accordingly, there are no systematic differences between the party and candidate categories. Accordingly, hypothesis one is rejected.

The interaction between party identification and the leader dummy also fits with the initial observations. They show that the leader dummy is negatively correlated with the effect of party identification on the dependent variable for all party and leader pairs. Accordingly, leader evaluations were significantly less affected by partisan information processing than party evaluations. The effect varies considerably between the party/leader pairs, but is considerable across the board. This provides strong support for hypothesis 2.

#### *4.4.3 Discussion*

This chapter has explored and compared party and leader evaluations in a dynamic information environment. Rather than estimating the direct effects of measured information exposure, it examined how information was used *overall* in party and leader evaluations.

The analysis found no systematic difference between the two categories when it comes to the role of prior attitudes on posterior evaluations. On the whole, German voters do not appear to

**Table 4.2 – Regression results for each party and leader pair with leader dummy**

	CDU/Merkel	CSU/Seehofer	SPD/Schulz	FDP/Lindner	AFD/Petry	Die Linke/ Wagenknecht	Grüne/ Göring-Eckardt
Intercept	1.42*** (0.07)	1.57*** (0.07)	1.27*** (0.06)	1.67*** (0.06)	1.50*** (0.12)	1.40*** (0.09)	1.77*** (0.10)
Lag	0.71*** (0.01)	0.77*** (0.01)	0.71*** (0.01)	0.68*** (0.01)	0.68*** (0.02)	0.68*** (0.01)	0.60*** (0.02)
PID	0.63*** (0.06)	0.97*** (0.07)	0.78*** (0.06)	1.94*** (0.12)	1.70*** (0.09)	1.81*** (0.09)	0.90*** (0.06)
Knowledge	- 0.01*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)
Gender	-0.17*** (0.01)	-0.04* (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.11*** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.02)	-0.04** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)
Education	0.05*** (0.01)	-0.02*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Age	0.00** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00** (0.00)
Leader Dummy	-0.29*** (0.03)	0.10** (0.03)	-0.6*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.23*** (0.03)	-0.06 (0.03)	0.24*** (0.03)
Lag*Leader Dummy	0.08*** (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	-0.06*** (0.01)
PID*Leader Dummy	-0.17* (0.08)	-0.17*** (0.07)	-0.37*** (0.04)	-0.62*** (0.15)	-0.21* (0.11)	-0.63*** (0.01)	-0.31** (0.10)

Results of autoregressive model with random coefficient on the lagged dependent variable. Note: \* = significant at 5% \*\* significant at 1% \*\*\* significant at 0.1%. Values in parentheses are standard errors.

Table 8



rely more heavily on prior beliefs in their evaluations of parties than candidates. However, it should be noted that this does not mean that party and leader evaluations are not subject to different information processing strategies. To establish this, we would have to account for the flow of information, which was not possible in the present case. Still, an analysis of overall information effects is consequential even if it does not allow us to directly test the causal mechanisms proposed by the theory. This study has shown that even if party and leader evaluations involve different information processing strategies at the micro-level, these are not apparent in overall information effects. This may be due to the particulars of the information environment rather than cognitive processes.

Even if party evaluations on the whole are as stable as candidate evaluations, they are clearly more susceptible to biased information processing. This is a striking result. It suggests that variations in party evaluations, although as considerable as variations in leader evaluations, are more beholden to party identifications. That is, attitude change occurs, but is more biased. Further investigation is necessary to get a better handle on the nature of these biased attitude changes. It is for example possible that party evaluations, being subject to partisan information processing, over time are more likely than leader evaluations to revert back to a mean value over time. At any rate, the results give cause for optimism about hypothesis two. Leader evaluations were less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

#### *4.4.4 Limitations*

The analysis provides strong support for hypothesis two, but does not support hypothesis one. This may be due to limitations in the lagged dependent variable as a measurement of attitude stability. Accordingly, future research should examine the stability of party and candidate evaluations over time, accounting for the possibility that unstable evaluations may fluctuate around a mean value. This is an important dimension of attitude stability.

Another significant limitation in the study was that it did not include a measure of negative party identification. Accounting for the effect of negative party identification on information processing is all the more pressing given the striking results from the previous chapter, which

showed that the different degrees of partisan bias in party and leader evaluations was near identical for in and out-group partisans.

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## Conclusion

As candidates displace parties in the “structure of electoral attitudes”, considerable attention has been devoted to the question of what differentiates attitudes directed at parties from attitudes directed at candidates. To this end, the literature has focused on a particular component of attitudes known as *impressions*. This thesis has expanded this field of inquiry to the related but analytically distinct concept of *evaluations*. In so doing, it has sought to answer the following research question:

*Are candidate evaluations less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations?*

The claim that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations is often made in the personalization literature. However, it mainly comes up as an explanation of personalized patterns of voting behavior and campaign strategies, and not as a phenomenon to be explained and tested in its own right. In examining the research question, this thesis developed a theoretical framework and conducted two empirical studies. In so doing, it made several contributions to the literature.

### 5.1 Theoretical contribution

Chapter two made a theoretical contribution. It identified limitations in the classical theories of political attitudes, which tend to view attitudes as direct responses to socio-political phenomena. Because they do not take seriously the role of cognitive heuristics in information processing, they overlook important mechanisms which influence how information is processed during attitude formation. Hamilton and Sherman’s use of the concept of entitativity to explain differences in evaluations of individuals and groups was adapted to the case of candidates and parties. Since a “*political* psychology cannot be understood without an account of *partisan*

psychology” (Leeper & Slothuus 2014: 130), this meant combining their theoretical framework with the theory of motivated reasoning. On this basis, I made argued that the abstract nature of parties facilitates a biased (dis)confirmation of information which challenges partisan predispositions. Candidate evaluations, on the other hand, facilitate an integrative style of information processing which is less easily captured by partisan bias.

## 5.2 Empirical contributions

Chapter three and four made empirical contributions to the literature. Chapter three explored the research question through a survey experiment conducted on a representative sample of Norwegian citizens. The experiment was designed to portray attitude formation during a political campaign leading up to a municipal election in Norway. By exposing respondents to the same information, and manipulating the target of that information, it was shown that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations. Respondents were considerably more responsive to information which challenged their partisan predispositions when evaluating candidates than parties.

The purpose of chapter four was to explore party and candidate evaluations in a dynamic information environment. To do so, it examined party and candidate evaluations in the run-up to the 2017 German federal election. A Bayesian learning model was implemented on panel data to estimate the use of old and new information in party and candidate evaluations, and the extent to which new information is subject to partisan bias. Contrary to the anticipations of the theoretical framework developed in chapter two, respondents surveyed in the time leading up to the 2017 German federal election displayed remarkably similar updating behavior across the two types of attitude objects. However, the results corroborated the main finding from chapter 3, that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations. Respondents’ use of new information was considerably less affected by party identification in their treatment of new information.

The two studies approached the research question from different angles. While chapter three estimated direct information effects in a controlled information environment, chapter four focused instead on *overall* information effects in a dynamic information environment. Accordingly, the former examined how individuals evaluate parties or candidates when exposed

to a particular piece of information, whilst the latter was an exercise in accountancy, estimating the proportion of old and new information used, and the extent to which the latter is interpreted in a biased fashion.

In addition to methodological differences, the studies explored the research question in different political contexts. Although similar in important ways, the Norwegian and German political systems are institutionally and culturally distinct. Perhaps more important than country differences is the fact that one study took place at the municipal level, and the other at the national level. It is possible that the dynamics of both party and candidate evaluations differ across these contexts. However, from the theoretical perspective, the main distinction of interest is between party and leader evaluations. Although the magnitude of the hypothesized effect might vary across contexts, there are no theoretical reasons to expect that the basic proposition that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations is contextual. Put together, the studies provide strong support for the conclusion that candidate evaluations are less susceptible to partisan bias than party evaluations.

### 5.3 Suggestions for future research

Comparisons of party and candidate evaluations appears a promising avenue for further research. The results of chapter three suggests that citizens use different information processing strategies when evaluating candidates and parties. However, the lack of post-treatment questions meant that it was unable to firmly establish the cognitive processes involved in each category. To get a better handle on the causal mechanisms at work, future studies on the topic should include variables commonly used to distinguish between online and memory-based information processing such as response latencies, measures of recall, attitude strength and the certainty of the evaluations (McGraw 2011)

Besides further examination of the research question examined in this thesis, the theory of entitativity provides several opportunities for future research on political attitudes. As noted in chapter two, entitativity does not refer to the objective reality of the attitude object, but how it is constructed in the mind of the perceiver. It is well documented in the social psychology literature that the perceived entitativity of groups depend on certain characteristics, such as the similarity

of group members and their unity of purpose. This is probably the case for parties too, and future research should examine which conditions influence the perceived entitativity of parties. In the context of the personalization literature, a particularly intriguing question is whether highly personalized parties that are closely associated with their leaders (so-called “charismatic parties” (Panebianco 1988)), are perceived as particularly entitative – and if so, how this affects citizen’s evaluations of them vis-à-vis other parties.

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# Appendix

## *Survey experiment – Norwegian version*

### *Party identity question*

Hvilke av følgende partier føler du deg nærmest?

- Rødt
- Sosialistisk Venstreparti
- Arbeiderpartiet
- Senterpartiet
- Miljøpartiet De Grønne
- Venstre
- Kristelig Folkeparti
- Høyre
- Fremskrittspartiet

Hvilke av følgende partier føler deg fjernest fra?

- Rødt
- Sosialistisk Venstreparti
- Arbeiderpartiet
- Senterpartiet
- Miljøpartiet De Grønne
- Venstre
- Kristelig Folkeparti
- Høyre
- Fremskrittspartiet

### A1.2 First vignette

Se for deg at det går mot valg i din kommune. Under valgkampen skriver lokalavisen følgende om [arbeiderpartiets] [toppkandidat/lokalparti/tre fremste kandidater]:

- [Kandidaten/Partiet/Den ene] har lagt frem en god plan for å forbedre kommunens veier og parker.
- [Kandidaten/Partiet/Den andre] viser et oppriktig engasjement for kommunens innbyggere.
- [Kandidaten/Partiet/Den tredje] har ifølge avisens meningsmåling høy tillit hos velgerne.

Basert på informasjonen ovenfor, hva er ditt inntrykk av [kandidaten/partiet/partiet]?

Misliker sterkt					Liker svært godt					
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

### A2.2 Second vignette

Uken før valget står en ny sak på trykk i lokalavisen. En lekkasje av intern korrespondanse avslører at [kandidaten/partiet/en av kandidatene] ikke har planer om å innfri sitt løfte om å forbedre kommunens veier og parker.

I lys av denne nye informasjonen, hva er ditt inntrykk av [kandidaten/partiet/partiet]?

Misliker sterkt					Liker svært godt					
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

**Table A1 – Pairwise Tukey comparison of evaluations of each attitude object by party identity after exposure to the *positive* vignette**

	<b>Estimate (SE)</b>	<b><i>P. value</i></b>
In-group candidate(F) – In-group candidate (M)	0.296 (0.251)	0.9372
In-group candidate(F) – In-group party (C)	0.1332 (0.257)	0.9996
In-group candidate(F) – In-group party (P)	0.1559 (0.254)	0.9987
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group candidate (F)	2.8386 (0.253)	<.0001
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group candidate (M)	2.6961 (0.252)	<.0001
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group Party (C)	3.6456 (0.254)	<.0001
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group Party (Pur.)	3.5271 (0.261)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – In-group Party (C)	-0.1629 (0.251)	0.9981
In-group candidate(M) – In-group Party (P)	-0.1401 (0.249)	0.9993
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group candidate (F)	2.5425 (0.248)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group candidate (M)	2.4001 (0.246)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group Party (C)	3.3504 (0.248)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group Party (P)	3.2311 (0.255)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – In-group Party (P)	0.0228 (0.255)	1.0000
In-group Party (C) – Out-group candidate (F)	2.7054 (0.254)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – Out-group candidate (M)	2.5630 (0.252)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – Out-group Party (C)	3.5133 (0.254)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – Out-group Party (P)	3.3940 (0.261)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group candidate (F)	2.6826 (0.252)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group candidate (M)	2.5402 (0.250)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group Party (C)	3.4905 (0.252)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group Party (P)	3.3712 (0.259)	<.0001
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group candidate (M)	-0.1425 (0.249)	0.9992
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group Party (C)	0.8079 (0.251)	0.0284
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group Party (P)	0.6885 (0.258)	0.1329
Out-group candidate (M) - Out-group Party (C)	0.9503 (0.249)	0.0036
Out-group candidate (M) - Out-group Party (P)	0.8310 (0.256)	0.0268
Out-group Party (C) - Out-group Party (P)	-0.1193 (0.258)	0.9998

<b>Table A2 – Pairwise Tukey comparison of evaluations of each attitude object by party identity after exposure to the <i>negative</i> vignette</b>		
	<b>Estimate (SE)</b>	<b><i>P. value</i></b>
In-group candidate(F) – In-group candidate (M)	0.0692 (0.228)	1.0000
In-group candidate(F) – In-group party (C)	-1.0354 (0.234)	0.0003
In-group candidate(F) – In-group party (P)	-0.9516 (0.231)	0.0011
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group candidate (F)	1.8314 (0.230)	<.0001
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group candidate (M)	1.3709 (0.229)	<.0001
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group Party (C)	1.6233 (0.230)	<.0001
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group Party (P)	1.5661 (0.237)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – In-group Party (C)	-1.1047 (0.229)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – In-group Party (P)	-1.0208 (0.227)	0.0002
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group candidate (F)	1.7622 (0.225)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group candidate (M)	1.3017 (0.224)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group Party (C)	1.5541 (0.225)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group Party (P)	1.4969 (0.232)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – In-group Party (P)	0.0838 (0.232)	1.0000
In-group Party (C) – Out-group candidate (F)	2.8669 (0.231)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – Out-group candidate (M)	2.4063 (0.230)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – Out-group Party (C)	2.6588 (0.231)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – Out-group Party (P)	2.6015 (0.238)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group candidate (F)	2.7831 (0.228)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group candidate (M)	2.3225 (0.227)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group Party (C)	2.5750 (0.229)	<.0001
In-group Party (P) – Out-group Party (P)	2.5177 (0.236)	<.0001
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group candidate (M)	-0.4606 (0.226)	0.4550
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group Party (C)	-0.2081 (0.227)	0.9846
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group Party (P)	-0.2653 (0.234)	0.9494
Out-group candidate (M) - Out-group Party (C)	0.2525 (0.226)	0.9533
Out-group candidate (M) - Out-group Party (P)	0.1952 (0.233)	0.9909
Out-group Party (C) - Out-group Party (P)	-0.0572 (0.234)	1.0000



**Table A3 – Pairwise Tukey comparison of change in evaluations of each attitude object by party identity between the two opinion readings**

	<b>Estimate (SE)</b>	<b><i>P. value</i></b>
In-group candidate(F) – In-group candidate (M)	-0.1941 (0.306)	0.9984
In-group candidate(F) – In-group party (C)	-1.1735 (0.312)	0.0045
In-group candidate(F) – In-group party (P)	-1.1076 (0.309)	0.0085
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group candidate (F)	-1.0153 (0.308)	0.0224
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group candidate (M)	-1.3253 (0.306)	0.0004
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group Party (C)	-2.0326 (0.308)	<.0001
In-group candidate(F) – Out-group Party (P)	-1.9610 (0.317)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – In-group Party (C)	-0.9794 (0.307)	0.0311
In-group candidate(M) – In-group Party (P)	-0.9135 (0.303)	0.0539
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group candidate (F)	-0.8212 (0.302)	0.1176
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group candidate (M)	-1.1312 (0.300)	0.0042
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group Party (C)	-1.8386 (0.302)	<.0001
In-group candidate(M) – Out-group Party (P)	-1.7669 (0.311)	<.0001
In-group Party (C) – In-group Party (P)	0.0659 (0.310)	1.0000
In-group Party (C) – Out-group candidate (F)	0.1582 (0.309)	0.9996
In-group Party (C) – Out-group candidate (M)	-0.1518 (0.307)	0.9997
In-group Party (C) – Out-group Party (C)	-0.8592 (0.309)	0.1019
In-group Party (C) – Out-group Party (P)	-0.7876 (0.318)	0.2066
In-group Party (P) – Out-group candidate (F)	0.0923 (0.306)	1.0000
In-group Party (P) – Out-group candidate (M)	-0.2177 (0.304)	0.9965
In-group Party (P) – Out-group Party (C)	-0.9251 (0.306)	0.0524
In-group Party (P) – Out-group Party (P)	-0.8535 (0.315)	0.1206
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group candidate (M)	-0.3100 (0.302)	0.9707
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group Party (C)	-1.0174 (0.305)	0.0196
Out-group candidate (F) - Out-group Party (P)	-0.9458 (0.314)	0.0530
Out-group candidate (M) - Out-group Party (C)	-0.7074 (0.303)	0.2751
Out-group candidate (M) - Out-group Party (P)	-0.6358 (0.312)	0.4553
Out-group Party (C) - Out-group Party (P)	0.0716 (0.314)	1.0000

